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# Reading Out of Doors: How Nature Becomes Text and Vice-Versa

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READING OUT OF DOORS:  
HOW NATURE BECOMES TEXT  
AND VICE-VERSA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Interdepartmental Program in  
Comparative Literature

by  
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M.A., University of Georgia, 1996  
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2007  
May 2010

## Dedication

For my father, Richmond M. Eustis, Sr.  
(Nov. 24, 1945-May 30 2009)  
who taught me how to get to work

## Acknowledgments

An enormous part of completing of a project like this one is attributable to the efforts and endurance of people other than the one who writes it. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation director, Dr. Gregory B. Stone, who, in addition to setting an example of daring, thoughtful, scholarship, somehow also negotiated an ideal balance between prodding me, reining me in, and letting me run on my own. I am grateful to have benefited from his guidance, and fortunate to enjoy his friendship.

Also, I must thank my dissertation readers for their encouragement and their challenges to my work. Professors Kevin Bongiorno, John Protevi, and Joseph Ricapito were indispensable sources of advice and insight. I am fortunate to have worked with such splendid scholars and teachers. Dr. J. Gerald Kennedy, the dean's representative, was a gift from the graduate school, and an insightful reader of my work. Dr. J. Jefferson Humphries, too, was immensely generous with his time and advice. I also must mention Dr. Adelaide Russo for her tireless efforts on behalf of the Program in Comparative Literature, and for her support and encouragement.

Thanks are also due my friends and fellow graduate students at Louisiana State University and elsewhere for their commiseration, encouragement, and extra sets of eyes. There are too many to name them all, but Thomas Halloran, Marianne Bessy, Logan Connors, Ioanna Panos and Greg Molchan figure prominently. My classmate in comparative literature, Rachel Spear, deserves special thanks for her ongoing willingness to provide advice and feedback, as does Meenakshi Dutta for her patience in listening repeatedly and indulgently to spoken-word drafts of this text.

Since my work is so concerned with the environment in which people read and write, I should mention my time in residence at White Plantation in Lafourche Parish—surely the most

pastoral (or bucolic) *locus amoenus* imaginable to complete a dissertation contending with the entanglement of nature and culture.

Last, I lack words powerful enough to thank my sisters, brother, and mother, who have been remarkable models of strength and love in what at times has been a difficult period for us all. Without their grace, patience, forbearance, and faith I could never have begun this work, much less completed it.

## Preface

This work took shape in several different environments: in the Northern Rockies and San Juan Islands, where I scribbled notes on backcountry permits and index cards jammed into backpacks and drybags; in my office in Baton Rouge; in the dining room of my family's farm in Lafourche Parish during an unusually frigid January; in the den of my parents' house in New Orleans, where I watched movies and read books with my father as he struggled with cancer.

It's worthwhile to mention this because much of my research focuses on the act of reading nature as a function of the reader's environment. The text, I contend, is as much influenced by the environment in which the reader construes it as it is by the environment in which the writer writes it. This is not to maintain that the acts of reading and writing are somehow determined by environment. Nor do I believe, however, that interacting with text through reading and writing is as pure an act as some critical theorists would have us believe. One reads differently—construes a different text—when one is browsing a text in a digital file on an office laptop, or turning pages quietly on a sofa while *Red River* plays on cable, or lying in a hammock at sundown on the deserted northernmost tip of Orcas Island in the Pacific. The divisions between text and mind, and between mind and the environment it perceives, I maintain, are far less distinct than some critics might contend.

The same holds for the ancient distinction between human and nature—a binary ever more blurred by the application of technology to both sides of the divide.

An encounter I had in August 2009 may illustrate the way in which humans have begun to collapse the distinction between nature and culture. After a summer of guiding sea kayakers in the San Juan Islands, I took a solo paddling trip into the Southeast Arm of Yellowstone Lake. Camping at sites miles from other people (and half a day's hard paddle from any road) certainly

constitutes a wilderness experience for many park visitors. However, as with all sites in Yellowstone, visitors must register with park rangers and obtain a permit to camp in the Southeast Arm. Because it is prime grizzly habitat, the Southeast Arm opens very late in the season. By happenstance, I obtained one of the very first permits available, with a launch date out of Sedge Bay.

The morning of August 14<sup>th</sup> was cold and gray, and I packed my kayak quickly, hoping to cover as much distance as I could before the lake's notorious afternoon winds hit and conditions became dangerous for a lone boater. As I was hiking up my spray skirt and fastening my drytop gaskets against the cold and damp air, a pickup truck with the park rangers' crest on the door pulled up to the beach where I intended to launch. The ranger got out with a smile and asked me something I didn't quite catch about Global Positioning System devices.

"I don't carry one," I said, a little uneasy. Was this some new park regulation I hadn't heard of? "I use a chart and compass."

The ranger nodded, still smiling. "Would you carry one?" she said.

"No, I don't think so," I said. "I actually think chart and compass are more reliable."

This time the ranger laughed. "I mean, would you carry one *for us*—as part of a study we're doing?"

The Park Service, the ranger explained, was studying grizzly activity in the Southeast Arm, in an effort to determine how close humans and grizzlies come to interacting in the earliest weeks the region is open to people. The grizzlies were all collared, transmitting their location, she said, and a GPS transmitter would transmit my position too. Then researchers could measure how close the bears and I came to each other.

"So you're going to collar me too?" I asked.

“Just temporarily,” the ranger said, grinning.

“What happens if our locations match up right on top of each other?”

“Then we’ll cite you for eating grizzlies,” she deadpanned, making notes on her clipboard.

I agreed to carry their GPS transmitter. I didn’t see any grizzlies, but I did see signs of bear activity. For the duration of my trip I was aware of the degree to which I had been placed on a grid, subject to measurement, observation. Had I wandered too far out of my campsite on my after-dinner explorations? Was my chosen itinerary OK? Could the rangers see where I was at any given moment? For a few days I inhabited the same physical space as the grizzlies under study, the bears navigating with sense of smell, with claw and muscle and guile, and I with map and compass, with white gas stove and Capilene clothing, and with carbon fiber paddle.

For those few days, the bears and I also inhabited the same textual space, the same data set, the same study under process. Under observation by the Park Service, both the bears and I became numbers—nature and culture subject to the same scrutiny in the not-quite-always-but-almost totally wild space.

During the time the bears and I were providing data for the Yellowstone rangers, President Barack Obama visited the park for the day with his family and a media entourage. They made the usual stops: the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, the Geyser Basin, Old Faithful, and they took the usual promotional photos. The question of nature is an important one for this new administration. Though certainly his call for renewed offshore drilling makes for a mixed environmental record, the president has demonstrated an inclination to preserve the National Parks and extend wilderness protection to some of the wilder country in the United States. This study, in its way, is an effort to help make sense of the way we encounter nature in



text—the basis on which we humans make decisions about how we interact with the nonhuman. Doing so will become increasingly necessary as we face environmental challenges as a species, and have to reconsider the way we inhabit the world—not only physically, but in narrative and verse, in letters and essays. The worlds we fashion—physically and in text—will influence the way we read and write those accounts in time to come.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Preface.....	v
Abstract.....	x
Introduction    The Blurred Circle: Nature into Text, Text into Nature.....	1
Chapter	
One            Artificial Nature and Natural Art: The Ecocritical Possibilities of Garcilaso de la Vega's <i>Écloga Tercera</i> .....	8
Two            Mountain Awe: Francesco Petrarch and Henry David Thoreau at the Limits of Language.....	70
Three           Concord and Colorado: Reading the River with Henry David Thoreau and John Wesley Powell.....	112
Four            Animal Masters: <i>The Jungle Books</i> and <i>The Case of                             the Animals versus Man</i> .....	159
Five            Pastoral Longing, Urban Misreading: <i>Marcovaldo                             and Into the Wild</i> .....	201
Afterword        Toward an Impure Pastoral.....	249
Works Cited.....	252
Vita.....	272

## Abstract

The tensions between city and country, the artificial and the natural, the real and the fake are at the heart of attempts to render nature in writing. In many such texts, nature—especially wilderness—is the realm of the real, authentic, and pure, while the city is the realm of the artificial and corrupt.

This placement of value in nature, members of the critical theory camp tend to counter, is misguided. Any effort to render nature in text is by its “nature” artificial—far more about human values embedded in language itself than about some extra-textual world.

With an approach derived from theorists and critics as diverse in approach as Robert Pogue Harrison, Gilles Deleuze, Hans Jonas and R.G. Collingwood, my study rejects both monisms—of both matter and text—in favor of retaining the two fields as separate, but so entangled in each other that any claim to “purity” is illusory, futile.

My study begins in Arcadia with an examination of the pastoral impulse through a close reading of Garcilaso de la Vega’s *Égloga Tercera*, which concerns the entwining of Nature with Art. It then moves through considerations of several sites of interaction between language and environment: the mountain as terrain of the wild sublime; the river as site of wild nature harnessed to the use of humanity; the animal as agent of natural law; and the city as the source of longing for the pastoral *locus amoenus*. The texts range from the Ikhwan al-Safa’s *Case of the Animals Versus Man* to Petrarch’s account of his ascent of Mt. Ventoux, from Thoreau’s journey on the Concord and Merrimack rivers to Krakauer’s account of Chris McCandless’s ill-fated foray into the wilderness of Alaska.

As my discussion suggests, Nature and Art, world and language, are all impure. Every encounter with the world implies language; every encounter with language limns a world.

## Introduction

### The Blurred Circle: Nature into Text, Text into Nature

“The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture”  
Wendell Berry, *Home Economics*

There has been no wilderness on the Earth for a long time.

This is not the same thing as saying that there has been no nature. And it may not be the same thing as saying that there are no more wild places on the planet.

There is, of course, the United States Government’s Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964, which states: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” There are, then, wildernesses by government definition.

There are other places that qualify as “wilderness” to people who should know. Aldo Leopold, were he alive today, still could find a tract of land that can absorb two weeks of backpacking—certainly in Alaska, and even still in some remote corners of the “Lower 48.” Surely such places still exist in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Australian bush. In his study *The Idea of Wilderness*, Roderick Nash is a bit less demanding. He writes: “In theory, if a person does not see, hear or smell civilization, he is in wilderness.” Nash quickly adds, however: “But most people want the additional knowledge that a soft-drink dispenser is not quietly humming around the trail’s next bend. Some want it to be miles away” (4). There are some places like that in most states in the U.S., the most developed nation in the world.

However, if by “wilderness” one means a remote area well beyond the reach of humans and their civilization—untouched by it, even—then such a place does not exist. Even in the

deepest oceans, traces of human-made chemicals and compounds are found in the fish. At the farthest poles, air pollution registers on detectors. There is trash on the summit of Mt. Everest. On some nights in remote national forests, if lone hikers stay very still and listen carefully, they can hear airplanes. Most of the nature we claim already has a good bit of human influence in its makeup: whether in the law that protects it, in the glossy guidebook that urges tourists to see it for themselves, in the topographical map that suggests its remoteness from the city, or in the Coke machine humming quietly around the corner from the gift shop. As James Lovelock explains: “Life has not adapted to an inert world determined by the dead hand of chemistry and physics. We live in a world that has been built by our ancestors, ancient and modern, and which is continuously maintained by all things alive today” (33). It is important to bear in mind that Lovelock contends that all living things—not just humans— created and maintain the present world.

Much of the problem, then, is one of definition. If a human boot once touching the soil invalidates it, then there can be no more wilderness. And as Nature comes to be defined more commonly as the place where human civilization is not—comes to be identified more strongly with wilderness, that is—then the existence of Nature is in trouble as well.<sup>1</sup> If wilderness is the realm of nature without humans, then the only way a human can experience wilderness without ruining it is through literature. We can only experience wilderness through text—the artificial creation of humans.

As problems of definition, the questions of wilderness, and Nature, and culture, and humanity’s proper place in relation to the three, become problems of text. Monitoring and

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<sup>1</sup> Following Neil Evernden, throughout this work I will refer to “nature” when discussing the set of matter-energy relations that constitute the world of experience, and to “Nature” when considering how the topic has been construed primarily in text.

preserving a wilderness area is a problem of science. Defining one is a problem of text.<sup>2</sup> Also, deciding what to do with it is a function of text—of how we read a terrain we describe as natural, and how we think others should read it. The words and the concepts humans use to construct those definitions are also things contemporary humans have not made. Humans define the world they inherited by deploying language they inherited—found ready to be applied.

This is not to contend, as some theorists do, that there is only language, and no way to approach the world outside of it. The world of experience, whether encountered in the wilderness or not, has a way of underscoring the futility of language to depict the encounter. The snake the hiker does not see, does not have a name for, still may kill, presence in the text or not. The hurricane destroys the city, whether it exists in the outside-text or not. It is the aftermath that concerns scholars of literature—the way those encounters are described in the terms of a language rich in phrases and strategies for describing encounters with nature. By the time the moment of description, depiction, definition, has come, the encounter is already past. The use of language is always in the past. The word cannot become the thing, cannot touch the thing, but it can point to the thing.

The act of reading out of doors reveals the way in which mind and world, wilderness and civilization, nature and culture, all interact. In this respect what was text becomes nature, as what was nature becomes text. They are not the same thing; one is not reducible to the other. However, each entity is so entangled with the other, the boundaries between them so blurred, that to attempt to separate them, to make them “pure,” would be to damage them both.

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of the present study, the term *text* is not used in the sense Jacques Derrida elaborates in *Of Grammatology*: a differential field of meaning. Rather, *text* in this sense hews much closer to *language* (although in some cases the “language” discussed will be malleable, and applicable to “signs” certain readers might perceive or “read” in nature).

The following study, instead of seeking to untangle word and world, text and nature, instead attempts to point out the ways in which they are tangled—and probably should remain that way. In encountering the natural, humans encounter not only the world of constantly self-transforming matter and energy; they encounter their own representations of that nature. The view of Mt. Rainier is just like the postcard. The shadow of Thoreau's deliberate living colors perceptions of Walden. As the world of representation takes part in the world of experience, humans read out of doors. That is: they read the "out-of-doors," in one sense. In another, the reader construes the text in an encounter with a physical environment, a set of material conditions. This set of material conditions is always in translation between the natural and the artificial: no text without nature, but no Nature without text. One reads differently in a library than by a river.

Some of the texts analyzed in the chapters that follow include episodes of figures literally encountering a text in an outdoor environment. Garcilaso's nymphs and shepherds both weave and read stories; Petrarch turns to Augustine's *Confessions* on the peak of Ventoux; Chris McCandless finishes reading *Doctor Zhivago* before his demise in the Alaska backcountry. Others concern an act of using text to make sense of a natural terrain: John Wesley Powell depicting the environment of the Grand Canyon as artist, or Thoreau resorting to the *Bhagavad Gita* to explain his encounter with the Concord and Merrimack rivers. In each case, the act of reading takes place in word and world.

This study cannot offer a comprehensive analysis, though it will offer a full one. In considering these texts, often from vastly different times and cultures, occasionally not, connections will become evident between texts, disciplines and terrains. The work has required a

bit of hydrology, some biology, some philology, some geology. Like the Pure Brethren of Basra, this work shuns no text, written or unwritten, natural or artificial.

Chapter One comprises several elements. Primary among them is a revisiting of the question of the pastoral as the mode and impulse underlying much nature writing and ecocriticism. It probes the connection between Arcadian pastoral and the wilderness “dyspastoral” as options for those who would flee culture into the realm of nature. To that end, it also revisits the *Égloga Tercera* of Garcilaso de la Vega, as an example of the impure pastoral, a *locus amoenus* not for the escape from culture into nature, but for the production of art.

Two encounters on the summit of a mountain are the focus of Chapter Two—experiences provoking “mountain awe,” and prompting a failure in language. The first part of the chapter considers the role of the Kantian sublime in constituting accounts of the alpine. It then takes up Francesco Petrarca’s letter describing his ascent of Mt. Ventoux, and offers a new explanation for why the poet falls silent after reading a selection from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* on the peak. Last, it considers Henry David Thoreau’s account of his attempt to climb Mt. Katahdin, from *The Maine Woods*, an account in which Thoreau tries to describe an encounter with wild nature that leaves him stunned.

Chapter Three remains with the work of Thoreau, in this case as he documents a journey with his brother in his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. It is in this work that Thoreau indicates the particular practice of reading out of doors—a practice which transforms text and landscape alike. The chapter continues with a work from the same period, place and language, but with a vastly different intent: John Wesley Powell’s narrative of his first descent of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. In this account, Powell learns to read the signs



produced by canyon and river, even as he and his expedition impose text upon the region they explore.

In Chapter Four, the study turns to its only living terrain—the animal—for a discussion of animals and law in literature. It begins with a brief discussion of literary critics and theorists' recent efforts to examine the use of the animal in text. Then it turns to Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books*, to consider the role of the jungle animals in teaching the orphan Mowgli the Law. This Law, while in many ways the instrument of empire, also may undercut the foundations of order on which empire rests. Last, it takes up a 10<sup>th</sup> century fable: *The Case of the Animals versus Man*, by the Ikhwân al-Safâ', the "Pure Brethren" of Basra, in which representatives of the animal kingdom use the human institution of the court to challenge human supremacy.

Last, Chapter Five considers literary representations of the most artificial of environments—the city. It begins with a discussion of Calvino's *Marcovaldo*, in which an industrial laborer tries various schemes to bring himself in touch with a nurturing Arcadian nature, and generally fails. It explores the possibility not only of encountering nature in the city, but of seeing the city as nature. The question of pastoral longing sparked by the encounter with city and text continues in an analysis of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, the account of the last two years of Chris McCandless, who starved to death in Alaska while in search of an adventure in the wilderness. The desire for the encounter with pure nature comes not from the encounter with nature, but from the encounter with culture, with the city, with text.

The study that follows proceeds along a progression from Arcadia, the realm of purest Nature, uninhabitable by humans, to the city, the realm most marked by human activity and will. At the same time, it explores the way that this progression really is circular: the city also is natural, Arcadia also artificial. The work is deliberately disparate in literatures, languages, times,

and cultures. Its purpose is not to add to the body of knowledge pertaining only to those works of literature, but to suggest how combinations of those works, efforts to contrast them with others, highlight the ways in which texts contest accounts of encounters with various terrains in the natural world—the pastoral, the mountain, the river, the animal, the city. My concern is as much with the contested terrain as it is with the literatures that contest them—as much with territory as with map.

My study owes a great deal of inspiration, both in form and content, to three works: Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*, and Roger Shattuck's *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*.<sup>3</sup> In approach these studies demonstrate what can be done with criticism in a comparative tradition; they offer a model to strive for, even though this study may not succeed in achieving similar results.

The following study, then, is an effort to find out what we talk about when we talk about nature—when we isolate one element in the long list of items and experiences that constitute the category of Nature—but that can be experienced physically, and can have effects on us in the world as well as in text. The study begins in Arcadia, a site at once the most natural and the most artificial. It ends in the city, which could be described in the same way.

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<sup>3</sup> The writer was a participant in the undergraduate seminar from which Professor Shattuck drew material for his book.

## Chapter One

### Artificial Nature and Natural Art: The Ecocritical Possibilities of Garcilaso de la Vega's *Égloga Tercera*

“[N]ature is made better by no mean  
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art  
Which you say adds to nature, is an art  
That nature makes...”

William Shakespeare  
*A Winter's Tale* (IV, 4, 1964-7)

It is no accident that debates about pastoral closely mirror those about nature: the pastoral mode is the oldest literary encounter between text and nature—dating at least to Theocritus and his *Eclogues* in the Third Century BCE.<sup>4</sup> As this chapter will note, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the pastoral mode had come to dominate even those evocations of nature not at first glance explicitly pastoral. Although an examination of pastoral as a distinct genre is beyond the scope of this study, the deployment of pastoral as trope and as critical mode is fundamental to an understanding of ecocriticism and the texts ecocritics tend to favor. Such a consideration also allows critics to address the way in which skeptics of ecocriticism as an approach have savaged any claims of contact with anything outside of text. As a means of approaching the pastoral mode, this chapter will attempt an ecocritical reading of the *Égloga Tercera* of the late Renaissance Castilian poet Garcilaso de la Vega. Though rarely considered outside of studies of Spanish Golden Age poetry, the work serves as a peculiarly apt example, not only because of its clever, self-conscious emulation of ancient and contemporary texts—its textuality—but also due to its composition in the middle of the era that, according to some critics, severed humanity from

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<sup>4</sup> It might be added that in the work of a few contemporary critics (see especially Robert Pogue Harrison), the earliest examples of pastoral as a mode, if not as a genre, continue to creep ever earlier—perhaps even as early as the tales of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, which date to at least 1,000 years before Theocritus. See David Damrosch: *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh*.

its primal connection with nature. Perhaps most important, as an exercise in pastoral mode, Garcilaso's *Third Eclogue* explicitly suggests an entanglement between the poetic human and the materials that constitute at once artist and art.

This chapter, then, will begin with a brief survey of the ways in which some key critics have construed the pastoral as genre and mode. Then it will draw on these sources to construct a working definition of pastoral for the purposes of this study. Much of the remainder of the chapter will consider the pastoral—and Garcilaso's eclogue specifically—in light of the broader contemporary debates surrounding the encounter between nature and text. This study focuses in particular on the challenge ecocriticism has issued to those who consider nature as “by default culturized, semiotic nature, the nature of social or/and linguistic constructivism,” as Bernd Herzogenrath writes (1). It will begin with an examination of the contention that pastoral, as genre, is never really about nature at all, but instead appeals to an unreachable, essentializing “outside-text.” An examination follows of the challenge mounted by ecocriticism, and by “Deep Ecology” in particular, with its call to “unhumanize” the landscape. Last, in the course of examining Garcilaso's work in light of this debate, this chapter will suggest a way of approaching nature and nature writing that rejects the drive toward purity of either world or text yet seeks to proceed without dismissing either. That is, it will explore ways that one may refer to nature, text, and humanity without reducing any of them to any pure, core identity or “essence.” As Jennifer Price writes: “we patrol a strict boundary between nature and not-nature with a hefty set of desires,” (xix). This study seeks to identify those desires, and then begin blurring the boundary between them.

## The Pastoral Problem

In his 16<sup>th</sup> Century work *Arcadia*, Sir Phillip Sidney set out plainly the fundamental contradiction of the pastoral: “Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers Poets have done... Her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden.” That is: the poets only present an idealized nature—a nature that never really existed, does not exist, and cannot exist (except, of course, in other instances of the pastoral, a consideration that becomes important to the interaction between text and nature later in this study). This section will consider this central conceit of the pastoral mode: the tension between the harnessing of Nature to make a textual, cultural point, and the literary deployment of Nature as a longing for flight from culture. These interpretations of pastoral mirror in large part the critical camps with regard to ecocriticism: the latter comprising those who maintain that there is a realm of experience outside text to which one may (and often must!) resort, and the former those who contend that such an argument is naïve fantasy at best, dangerous essentializing at worst. The section begins with a discussion of the critical discussion of “hard” and “soft” or “complex” and “sentimental” pastoral. It continues with a discussion of the wilderness as a site for the contemporary pastoral and its cousin, the “dyspastoral.” Last, drawing on these discussions, it will adopt a working set of qualities of the pastoral mode for use in this study.

The pastoral as a genre has its origins in the *Idylls* of Theocritus, written between 316 and 260 BCE, and based on song competitions between shepherds. This work of Theocritus has its basis in more “realistic” portrayals of shepherd life than later versions of the pastoral display. Raymond Williams, among others, has noted that in Theocritus’s work, the depiction of pastoral life includes some of its hard facts: “Wolves, foxes, locusts and beetles are as much part of the

experience as balm and rockrose and apples and honey” (15).<sup>5</sup> Although the seeds of the later, “Arcadian” pastoral visions are evident in Theocritus’s early work, Paul Alpers contends that the essential fiction in the pastoral is “not the Golden Age or idyllic landscapes, but herdsmen and their lives” (x). For Alpers, the tradition requires several elements: an idyllic landscape pertaining to the lives of shepherds, the environment as a backdrop for shepherds singing, an air of leisure, and attention to the tension and interplay between art and nature (22). If critics are to fashion a definition of the pastoral that does not include most kinds of writing about nature, Alpers suggests drawing the line very close to where Theocritus originally left it. However, if the definition of the pastoral is to include nothing more than fictional depictions of the song-lives of shepherds, then there is an entire genre of work produced after Theocritus that needs a new name. Here, too, are the seeds of the critical distinction between the idealized pastoral of harmonious, tranquil nature, and nature subject to forces of history and culture.

After all, the pastoral, as evidenced by the second major collection of classical pastoral, is anything but a stable genre. In his *Eclogues*, Virgil begins a shift in pastoral concern from a “realistic” (if idealized) terrain inhabited by shepherds and their flocks, to an evocation of an idealized Golden Age landscape, akin to that evoked in the work of Hesiod in the *Theogony* and Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. Williams notes, “It is only a short step from the natural delight in the fertility of the earth to the magic invocation of a land which needs no farming” (17). Virgil named this magic, self-farming land “Arcadia,” a name that other writers in the pastoral mode would adopt for their own work (though it is clear that one “Arcadia” is not a perfect substitute for another). Though Theocritus provided his urban readers an idealized view of the songs of the mountain shepherds, Virgil provides his sophisticated urban audience an account of what Renato

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<sup>5</sup> Williams is discussing Theocritus’s “Idyll IX” in this passage.

Poggioli calls the “wishful dream of happiness gained without effort” (14). This is the realm of Alpers’s soft pastoral: the vision of nature as embracing, leisurely, harmonious—as opposed to the city or the court, in which life is difficult, complicated, treacherous, and in some way “false.” Alpers sets out his categories by drawing a distinction in the way writers and critics conceive of nature. For example, to Alpers, Poggioli is a soft pastoralist who “identifies pastoral nature with the spontaneous growth, eternal spring, and milk and honey of the Golden Age.” In contrast is the “hard” pastoral of Frank Kermode, who classifies pastoral nature as “the wild or savage as opposed to the cultivated, the material upon which Art works” (352).<sup>6</sup> Humanity belongs in the landscape of the soft pastoral only to the degree that it does not mar the textual view by labor, or by dragging in overt history or politics.

The qualification is important in this case, because the intrusion of politics and history would negate the possibility of cultural or historical critique by way of pastoral, and this critique is at the core of the soft pastoral. As Terry Gifford notes, the very evocation of a better life in the idealized rural landscape already always entails a critique of urban society—the society which enables pastoral verse to be written in the first place, and to whose residents the poet addresses his work (20). However, if that world of politics and history intrudes on the textual idyll, the possibility of flight into Arcadia is lost. History and politics, therefore, must remain offstage—the reasons for the performance, but never seen. Almost from its very inception, then, the pastoral implicates the rural and the urban in one another. No garden, no pastoral, true. But also: no city, no pastoral. This tension between city and country, even as they are entangled with each other, is the basis for the distinction between what Leo Marx calls “sentimental” and “complex” pastoral. The first accepts wholeheartedly the dream of rural tranquility in Nature; the second

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<sup>6</sup> Alpers quotes Kermode’s *English Pastoral Poetry*. London: Granger Index Reprint Series, 1952: 12.

undercuts itself through an ironic distance that enables critique of the illusion and the motives of the culture that produces it. As Marx explains, “If unimproved nature is the location of all that we desire, then civilization as Europeans have known it can only signify a fall or lowering of man’s estate” (76).

The possibility of this kind of distinction may have arisen in the Renaissance. William Empson, for example, sets the Renaissance as the period in which the seemingly naïve pastoral became a more common vehicle for societal critique: “The realistic sort of pastoral (the sort touched by mock-pastoral) also gives a natural expression for a sort of social injustice. So far as the person described is outside society because too poor for his benefits he is independent, as the artist claims to be, and can be a critic of society” (17). At this time, Raymond Williams also notes a shift between earlier pastoral visions of countryside, which include at least some depiction of rural labor, and the pastoral of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which began to take as its setting a sort of Arcadian, Golden Age landscape into which labor never intrudes. In this Renaissance era “neopastoral” as Williams terms it, the “living tensions” of “pleasure with loss; harvest with labour” common in the classical pastoral disappear, leaving a portrait not of living nature, but of “an enamelled world” (18). This world in artistic stasis, Williams notes, hides a brutal reality:

Even if we exclude the wars and brigandage to which it was commonly subject, the uncountable thousands who grew crops and reared beasts only to be looted and burned and led away with tied wrists, this economy, even at peace, was an order of exploitation of a most thoroughgoing kind: a property in men as well as in land; a reduction of most men to working animals, tied by forced tribute, forced labor, or ‘bought and sold like beasts’; ‘protected’ by law and custom only as animals and streams are protected, to yield more labour, more food, more blood; an economy directed, in all its working relations, to a physical and economic domination of a significantly total kind. (38)

By removing a living, laboring humanity from the pastoral landscape in favor of this vision of rural luxury, the writers of pastoral in the Renaissance had succeeded in making the mode a



profoundly political one—one that undercuts its own fantasy of apolitical ease. In Williams's assessment of the pastoral, a sentimental pastoral mode such as Marx suggests might be impossible. No pastoral would allow the wary reader to succumb entirely to the charms of fictional nature—and no writer could draft such a depiction without being aware of the irony between actual nature, and the kind he or she depicts in text.

The more writers of pastoral attempt to excise the life and labor of humans from the landscape, the more pastoral becomes a comment on the very society it purports to escape. Although Marx's "sentimental" category of pastoral is subject to challenge in this sense, it remains useful in its way. This is because as pastoral became on its face less realistic and more evocative of a past or future Golden Age, it also became much more trenchant as a critique of the centers of power. Marx's sentimental pastoral might be read, therefore as some of the most complex of all. When a pastoral work undercuts its own illusion of "peace and harmony in nature" (25), it leaves the sentimental camp and joins the ranks of the complex pastoral, according to Marx. Common to all complex pastoral works, Marx suggests, is what he calls the "counterforce"—his famous "machine in the garden." Simply put, this counterforce is a recognition of "the reality of history" (363). In these pastoral works, the perception of rural or wild landscape as "a repository of meaning and value" remains, "but at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning" (363). This counterforce might take as a representative a displaced herdsman, as Virgil's work does, or the intrusive sound of a train engine, as Thoreau does. In Marx's analysis, the possibility of naïve and complex pastoral occurs much earlier than the Renaissance, and continues long afterward. For Marx, the complex pastoral requires some overt dispelling of the Arcadian dream—not simply an awareness on the part of

the reader of the kind of masking of history and politics some pastoral entails. If the pastoral requires the reader to rely on a knowledge of the brutal regimes Williams rightfully evokes in reading the pastoral, then it falls in the realm of the sentimental. If, however, it shows an awareness of the world of culture and its effects on the Arcadian garden, it becomes a complex piece. It is an undercutting in the text, not in the reader.

This, then, is how Leo Marx's categories remain useful—in establishing that simply including its own critique does not eject a work from the realm of the pastoral. If the pastoral includes the sentimental depiction of bountiful Arcadia, it also includes the vision of the countryside as refuge for displaced herdsman and farmers. This landscape, however, has for the most part been intended as, and read as, a fictional one. Though, as Marx explains, the pristine landscape has been a feature of the mode for centuries, “the writer did not pretend it was an actual place, and the reader was not expected to take it as one. (In Europe, for one thing, it was difficult to credit the existence of a place that was both ideal and unoccupied)” (47). In the pastoral mode, then, the point was not to depict some actual bit of terrain faithfully, but to deploy the tropes of the literary landscape properly. It is not actual waterfalls and swards the poet arranges in the pastoral, but poetic ones, as Williams suggests: “a rural landscape emptied of rural labor and of laborers; a sylvan and watery prospect, with a hundred analogies in neo-pastoral painting and poetry, from which the facts of production had been banished” (125). In this sense, the pastoral, then, is the literary depiction—naïve or not—of the possibility of flight from text and culture. In the pastoral, Nature claims to stand clear of the cultural world that makes it possible.

This question of the presence of actual laborers—humans—in the pastoral landscape leads to an important element in the contemporary pastoral mode—the idea of wilderness. In

many respects, the categories “wilderness” and “nature” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century became interchangeable. The wilderness location began to supplant the farm or the garden as the repository of value. Nature was not the potted *figus*. Nature was the unspoiled aspen grove off the trail at 9,000 feet. Even (perhaps especially) in these remote wildernesses, Williams is right to point out the facts of production, the operation of humans in and on any natural landscape. Wilderness areas always require the imposition of power through law to maintain them. Also, the establishment of wilderness areas frequently has involved evicting native tribes from the “wild” terrain to keep the area “pure.” Also, in order to maintain their status as wild areas, the people who frequent these areas must be “erased” from depictions of the territory. In the wild protected areas of the United States, for example, trail maintenance crews are ghosts, the backcountry rangers keep a low profile, and too many other hikers can ruin a personal quest for solitude and an encounter with the wild.

This illusory possibility of escape from culture not to the rural hinterlands but to the pristine wilderness is one of the more recent developments in pastoral,<sup>7</sup> and it has begun to shift its aesthetic basis. If the classical pastoral and the neo-pastoral as it changed during the Renaissance relied on beauty to achieve its effect, the wilderness pastoral relies on the concept of the sublime.<sup>8</sup> That is, the nonhuman is expressed as radically incomprehensible to the human mind, which then recoils on itself and on its own finite capacity for apprehending the nonhuman.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the wilderness pastoral or “dyspastoral” is not necessarily the only new manifestation of the pastoral mode. One might also head in the direction of Alpers and include the sort of Neo-Georgics of Wallace Stegner and Wendell Berry as depictions of more realistic shepherds and farmers working in an actual countryside. The wilderness pastoral is more akin to the Arcadian pastoral than to its Bucolic counterpart. That is, it is a site of flight from culture to a terrain that humans may visit but may not inhabit.

<sup>8</sup> I am relying here on the Kantian sublime, which makes the concept of sublimity one of mind. In Kant’s work, sublimity does not inhere in the *Ding an sich*, but rather in the perceiving mind. (There may be some interesting possibilities here, however, in treating certain nonhuman relations as “triggers” for the performance of the sublime in the human mind.)

Because this mode of pastoral relies as often on feelings of awe and fear as it does on overwhelming beauty, perhaps it should be termed “dyspastoral.” While the traditional pastoral (comprising classical and neo-classical modes) relies on the fit between humans and nature—the effortless ease and bounty of Arcadia, the dyspastoral relies on a landscape which humans cannot inhabit, and forces which humans cannot control and for which they are not fit. The refuge offered in this kind of pastoral is not the Golden Age life of effortless ease—a Golden Age past or to come, implicitly critiquing contemporary society. Rather, the dyspastoral offers the stern reassurance that there are natural realms which humans cannot regiment, cannot subject to their surveillance and control.

The dyspastoral, too, has its naïve and complex modes, in Marx’s sense. The naïve or sentimental mode might include work in some popular magazines or calendars: works which depict a dehumanized landscape standing clear in the dawn light (or the ice and snow of winter). The more complex pastoral includes such work as James Dickey’s *Deliverance* or Jon Krakauer’s *Into The Wild* or *Into Thin Air* (and the accompanying movies). In these works, humans enter a wild landscape in search of escape from the world of culture, of text. They seek, in short, a realm free of human habitation and control. The question of whether such a landscape is fit for humans to inhabit is not secondary, but it is deployed differently: this pastoral mode seeks landscape specifically *not* in conformance to human comfort and ease. The challenge, difficulty and lack of human presence itself is the point. In the case of Dickey’s and Krakauer’s work, the texts undercut themselves. The naïve nature-yearning of the protagonists leads them into situations far outside of their competence and control. The wildness of the terrain into which these protagonists venture, however, is wild as much by human agency as it is by any work of uncreated, undeveloped nature. The wildness in these works is what the protagonists bring into

the wild with them—and what they bring frequently is a stubborn rejection of the very culture that might have saved them. In contrast to this kind of wilderness pastoral are naïve accounts of “monster storms,” typhoons, and earthquakes, in which the human element in the catastrophes is carefully erased. If the climbers perish, a shipful of sailors is lost, or a town is destroyed, it is because “Nature is implacable,” beyond our control, the trope runs. It has nothing to do with decisions that humans made leading up to the moment of the event (to destroy surrounding wetlands, neglect proper development of land, or to abandon the poor to their fate, for example).

The question of the wilderness as a pastoral mode (or the obverse of the pastoral mode) is of central importance in American literature and history, as Marx notes. Early depictions of the Americas in literature and art showed either a howling wilderness or an abundant garden Arcadia. (Though poetically amplified, Marx suggests, the New World was both.). Perhaps more important are the kinds of behavior such depictions enable on the part of humans who intend to inhabit and exploit that landscape. “To describe America as a hideous wilderness ... is to envisage it as another field for the exercise of power” Marx explains. “Survival in a howling desert demands action, the unceasing manipulation and mastery of the forces of nature, including, of course, human nature” (43). This dyspastoral, reliant as ever on the wilderness as aesthetic foundation, continues to be a means of exercising power. However, this power in more recent times has tended not toward the development of the wilderness, but to its preservation. To be sure, there is wilderness and “wilderness.” Some people in a small range of professions still make arguments referencing the development of “worthless” wild land—usually undeveloped terrain that lacks the picturesque qualities of the sublime wilderness landscape.<sup>9</sup> However, the

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<sup>9</sup> One argument in favor of oil drilling in part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge holds that ANWR is not pretty. See Jonah Goldberg, “Ugh, Wilderness!: The Horror of ‘ANWR,’ the American Elite’s Favorite Hellhole,” *National Review*, Aug. 6, 2001.

main thrust of wilderness pastoral has been not to introduce humanity to the landscape but to bar people from it altogether. In this case, the difficulty is that wilderness by this definition is where humans are not. To set foot in wilderness is to turn it into something else, whether that something is “home” or “literature”. Of course, humans can be raw nature too. Depicted in this way, wilderness, pristine, shrink-wrapped, kept clear of human contact, is a reactionary fantasy. It is not *all* people who must keep out (after all, we must have an observer of this wilderness, one who can testify to its sublimity), it is just “those who aren’t the *right sort* of people.” This definition leads to the troubling conclusion that the only true wilderness one can know is not the uncreated one that a hiker intrudes upon accidentally. It is a version of wilderness Giambattista Vico might have appreciated with his contention of *verum factum*: it is the one we create in text. The only true wilderness, then, would be the one created by humans.

This contemporary requirement that Nature remain unsullied by culture, text or theory has important implications not only for recent readings of the pastoral—and of nature writing in general—but also for the critical project in which humans attempt to use language to come to terms with nature. The realm of the pastoral is a broad one. Alpers suggests that if there is no shepherd, the work cannot be pastoral. Marx, in a much broader view, describes the pastoral’s hallmark as “the contrast, explicit or tacit, between two ways of life: one complex and the other simple; one oriented toward power, wealth, and status, the other toward love, art, and music; and each grounded in a distinct set of relations with the natural world” (379). Broader still, Laurence Buell defines the pastoral as “All literature—poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction—that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city” (“Ideology,” 23). These definitions, however, leave out an essential element to the pastoral: the attempt to reconcile nature and art, world and text, that is at the heart of the pastoral project. For purposes

of this study, then, the pastoral is a mode that investigates the tensions between nature and culture, and attempts to reconcile them. This is not to say that the pastoral seeks to reduce one to the other, but to depict the ways in which each is implicated in the other. In this sense the pastoral becomes the omnivore of nature writing: at once political commentary, social commentary, satire of court, field and self. It deploys the beautiful, co-opts the sublime and forms the basis of Ecocriticism and its progeny Deep Ecology, Dark Ecology, Foundational Ecology and Ecofeminism, among many others. Even the disaster tales of the ecological sublime, the rage of natural disasters, and the narratives of death at altitude partake in the pastoral trope of longing for contact with the world beyond the text: the world, which in the words of Vico, we cannot truly know, for we have not played a role in making it.

However, perhaps more interesting than the notion that the pastoral is artificial and political is the idea that the pastoral is not entirely artificial either, that it arises at least in part from an experience of place—whether rural or urban—and the placement of a body in a set of linked relations humans have called “nature.” In the pastoral the wild includes the civilized and vice-versa. There is no pure nature, just as there is no pure art. In the following section, the neo-pastoral *Third Eclogue* of Garcilaso de la Vega will illustrate the way in which even in self-referential, self conscious pastoral work is entangled with the world of material relations. For this study the poem forms a sort of textual *locus amoenus* for situating contemporary debates about ecology and literature. The tension at the heart of the pastoral is at the heart of the ecocritical project—the attempt to grapple with nature and text, and how each influences the other.

### **The *Locus Amoenus***

Given the vast range of pastoral in Greek and Latin, the options in Italian or English—or an array of other languages, the *Égloga Tercera* of Garcilaso de la Vega might seem an

unconventional place to begin. One of the first U.S. scholars to take up Garcilaso's work, Hayward Keniston, even noted that "[a]lthough the poem is called an eclogue, there is little of the pastoral about it, save the formal responsive songs at the end. The rest is either mythological or allegorical" (260). However, with respect to the definition taken up in the previous section, this work of Garcilaso's is very much in the pastoral mode—more so even than many other works some might classify as pastoral. In the case of generalized pastoral work, any pleasant place—a secluded vale with a gentle stream and soft grass, a remote field of Indian Paintbrush miles from any path—may serve. In the more specific case of a study of the debates about the interaction of text and nature, Garcilaso's *Égloga Tercera* serves as a particularly apt textual *locus amoenus*. This section contends that Garcilaso's *Third Eclogue* should occupy a central place in any study of the modern pastoral, due not only to its self-conscious "literariness" (fairly common among pastoral work, after all) but also to its suggestion that the wilderness idyll and the world of culture, nature and art, both are implicated in each other, and cannot be separated without disastrous consequences.

By all accounts Garcilaso de la Vega was one of those extraordinary figures so common during the Renaissance—the courtier-warrior-poet. He was born around 1499 and served the emperor as one of his elite *contino* soldiers and as a diplomat. Garcilaso fought for the emperor against the *comunero* uprising in 1519 to 1521, a choice that brought him into conflict with his own brother and the brother of his longtime mistress Doña Guiomar Carillo.<sup>10</sup> Juan Francisco Alcina and Elias Rivers place Garcilaso at the court of Naples in 1532, and it was there that he may have read the works of Petrarch, Ariosto, and Sannazaro, in addition to those of Virgil and

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<sup>10</sup> Doña Guiomar's family connection to the *comunero* camp may have prompted the emperor to forbid her to marry Garcilaso, though she gave birth to his son. See María del Carmen Vaquero Serrano, *Garcilaso: apuntes para una nueva biografía. Los Ribadeneira y Lorenzo Suárez de Figueroa*. Ciudad Real: Oretania Ediciones, 1999.



Ovid. Alcina places special emphasis on Garcilaso's encounter with Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, from which he would learn "the taste for aesthetic contemplation of nature, for natural beauty enshrined in its archetypes in the pastoral life, [and] the wise use and adaptation ... of classical sources" (34).<sup>11</sup> The *Third Eclogue* may have been among Garcilaso's last works, composed during a military expedition to Provence in 1536. It was the first to be written in *octavas reales* (royal octaves) in Castilian, and it follows what in many ways is a fairly conventional pastoral format. The sophisticated narrator feigns the voice of a rustic. He describes a pastoral site where nymphs, in a bit of extended *ecphrasis*, weave tapestries depicting three scenes from classical myth, and one contemporary scene. Two shepherds singing about their lovers intrude on the scene, and the nymphs dive into the river to make their escape. It is a poem about love and art, but it is also a piece about how love and art cannot be separated from nature and death, and Garcilaso is sly enough to couch his views in self-conscious borrowing from other classical and Renaissance texts—works which form the raw materials for his verse.

In Chapter 6 of Book 2 of his *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*, Cervantes has his hero refer to Garcilaso as "el gran poeta castellano nuestro" before he recites line 202 from his *Elegia I*. He is urbane, well-traveled, well-read, well-connected, a veteran of the most illustrious courts in three nations—all of which forms the background to the blistering irony Garcilaso provokes by pretending to pose as a simple rustic. Garcilaso (or his narrator) begins by explaining his dual nature to the "Maria" of the poem.<sup>12</sup> As the introduction to his

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<sup>11</sup> "de él aprenderá el gusto por la contemplación estética de la naturaleza, por la belleza natural en sus aquetipos plasmada en la vida pastoril, el sabio uso y adaptación a propósitos distintos de las fuentes clásicas, el uso de la adjektivación del epíteto, la plasticidad expresiva suavemente sobra," All translations of Alcina are mine.

<sup>12</sup> Keniston identifies the woman as Maria Osorio de Pimentel, wife of Don Pedro de Toledo, who at the time was viceroy of Naples, though scholars have differed on whether she was the true intended recipient.

eclogue progresses, Garcilaso undercuts his own assertions at nearly every opportunity. He begins with a frank allusion to the myth of Orpheus, whose decapitated head was said to go on singing as the river waters carried it to the sea. Even in death, Garcilaso claims, even

... con la lengua muerte y fría en la boca  
pienso mover la voz a ti debida;  
libre mi alma de su estrecha roca,  
por el Estigio lago conducida  
celebrando t'irá, y aquel sonido  
hará parar las aguas del olvido (11-16)

...with my tongue dead and cold in my mouth  
I will send the voice owed to you;  
my soul free from its narrow rock,  
driven across the Stygian lake  
it will go, celebrating you, and that sound  
will make the waters of oblivion stop<sup>13</sup>

This section demonstrates a sophisticated inversion of the Orpheus myth. Instead of the head going on singing as natural forces “play” upon it, Garcilaso proposes that his soul will continue to sing the lady’s praises after its final separation from the “narrow rock” of the body. Garcilaso continues to wink at his readers as he highlights his dual nature not only in a spiritual sense, but in a material one: this material world in which he must snatch fleeting moments of leisure during his soldierly career to write a few verses. His life is in constant flux between the two practices “tomando ora la espada, ora la pluma (taking up now the sword, now the pen)” (40). He is soul and body, warrior and poet—and shepherd and courtier. When he asks Maria to “aplica ... los sentidos / al bajo son de mi zampoña ruda (apply your feelings / to the humble sound of my crude oaten flute)” (42), Garcilaso begins his work with a sly pastoral claim: that he is simpler than his texts. The rude song of his oaten flute mirrors what the pastoral is supposed to do: depict a life simpler than that of the court. As Mary Barnard observes, however, “Garcilaso's modesty

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<sup>13</sup> All translations of Garcilaso are mine unless otherwise specified.

topos reveals the duplicity of pastoral: its artlessness is a deception” (318). Garcilaso escapes the world of the *espada* for the pastoral of the *pluma*. It is certainly no mistake that Garcilaso constructs his vision of nature using tools taken from it: the quill and the sheet of paper derived from trees. They are tools of poetry to as great a degree as the fictional oaten flute.

This song of the shepherds, accompanied by the rustic flute, provides the last notes of Garcilaso’s eclogue. While marking perhaps the most traditional part of the eclogue (Keniston calls it “thoroughly conventional” and “almost translated from Virgil” [260]), it also provides a clue to the pastoral not as a purely idyllic scene, but one in which Nature is a contested concept. This is not a break with the rest of the poem, but instead a sort of summation of the way that art and nature interact in this version of pastoral. These shepherds, Tirreno and Alcino<sup>14</sup> are intruding on a scene at once mythical, historical, and geographic. Though the critic El Brocense (Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas) in his sixteenth century studies of Garcilaso’s work shows that the songs are derived from Virgil’s “Eclogue VII,” Garcilaso’s pastoral unfolds on the banks of the Tajo. Here, to repurpose Marx’s remark about the difficulty of finding pristine land in Europe, is terrain both ideal and populated—if not always both at the same moment. The sound of the *zampoña* precedes the arrival of the shepherds, who walk behind the flock (290-1), and the song gives the nymphs enough time to disappear back into the Tajo, whence they emerge at the beginning of the poem. The shepherd-poets arrive singing about love, but their song also contests the image of Nature; it is both paradise and nightmare. In using pastoral and dyspastoral tropes to speak of their loves, the shepherds allow Garcilaso to undercut the naïve or sentimental pastoral, while preserving the possibility of nature as something outside of the control of humanity.

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<sup>14</sup> Some critics write their names: Thyrreno and Alzino, but (except for direct quotations) I will follow the Spanish spelling, which I consider simpler.

Alan Paterson notes that the shepherds do not simply sing songs that are incompatible with one another. Instead the songs “stand in strict dialectical relationship” to each other. “Thyrreno's joy at Florida's approach is countered by Alzino's trepidation at Phyllis's; Florida as Spring, accompanied by sweet breezes, is countered by Phyllis as a raging storm; Thyrreno's cornucopia is countered by Alzino's blight, and so on” (91). The depictions are set out like drama, with a call and response structure. Each shepherd receives four alternating verses of eight lines to sing the praise or the awe of their love as described in natural imagery. The effect is comic, with Tirreno expressing his boundless experience of beauty in love and nature, and Alcino steadily undermining what certainly appears to be naïve glee in the face of forces too powerful, and too unpredictable for him. Though perhaps Paterson is not as clear on this point as he might be, it is not that one shepherd is in love and the other is not. Rather, they both are in love, and their love encompasses both beauty and fear or awe.

Tirreno's love is the love of the naïve pastoral. Flérída, he sings, is more beautiful than an April meadow: “más hermosa / que'l prado por abril de flores lleno (more beautiful / than the April meadow filled with flowers)” (307-8). The love Tirreno expresses is one of simple beauty, one in which he (and by proxy, other people) are to be comfortable and at ease in an environment of beauty. Alcino, on the other hand, depicts a much more austere love, a harsher longing, with natural imagery surprisingly dark to express his love. In his first lines he calls Filis “hermosa,” then asks if a bat could wish more for the onset of night and the end of day apart from her than he does (313-320). If Tirreno's verses are the stuff of the sentimental pastoral, filled to brimming with the whitest milk, the largest array of flowers, and the sweetest southern winds, then Alcino's responses stem from the sublime, the dyspastoral of forces of love and nature entirely too large and powerful for mere humans to understand much less control. The power of

tremendous sierra winds is tiny, he sings, compared to the ire of Filis:

¿Ves el furor del animoso viento  
embravecido en la fragosa sierra  
que los antiguos robles ciento a ciento  
y los pinos altísimos atierra,  
y de tanto destrozo aun no contento,  
al espantoso mar mueve la Guerra?  
Pequeña es esta furia comparada  
a la de Filis con Alcino airada (329-336)

Do you see the fury of the raging wind  
strengthened in the craggy mountains  
that throws the highest pines and eldest oaks  
to the ground by the hundreds,  
and still unsatisfied with that destruction  
wages war on the terrifying sea?  
Puny that rage is compared  
with the fury Filis levels at Alcino

The imagery here is of wild nature: tremendous winds uprooting trees, throwing pines to the earth, and bringing war to the terrifying sea. For Alcino, nature is disaster, blight (which Filis, nevertheless, can cure with a glance). While Flérída is the willow, Filis is the ash. Alcino's lines are not undercutting his mistress's beauty, or expressing disgust or hate (she can, after all cure blight). But for Alcino the face of natural power, rather than natural beauty, is the more apt analogue for love. While Garcilaso gives Alcino's dark vision of love and nature the last word, he does not crown a victor in the song competition. Nature in the shepherd's song is neither simply sweet nor cruel. Rather, both shepherds are in their way correct; and each provides a vision of an essential portion of nature. To reduce the scene to Arcadia or Hell would be to succumb to a naïve vision of nature. While the shepherds are guilty of such sentimentality, whether beautiful or sublime, Garcilaso is not. By harnessing the dialectically opposed songs of the shepherd, Garcilaso ends with a more complex vision than the one presented by either of them. The shepherds' song, then, is perhaps in this context not as conventional as Keniston

suggests. Garcilaso is suggesting a broad Nature, one that parodies itself and mocks human attempts to fix it in text, even as it acknowledges that contradictory portraits are true. How is nature to be discussed, if every attempt to evoke it, like the *via positiva* of the scholastics' description of God, is true?

Part of the answer lies in Garcilaso's choice of setting, which is at once mythical and realistic. It is the Tajo River in the vicinity of Toledo, but it is a Tajo that is, in the words of the Moorish fairy tales "so and not so." In his depiction of the setting, Garcilaso relies as much on classical description of pastoral sites as he does on his experience of a terrain he knew very well. This situating of the pastoral at once inside and outside history offers an alternative to concepts of the pastoral only as either a doomed flight from, or an overt embrace of, culture and history. Garcilaso's pastoral comprehends both Nature and history, both the nature of the text, and the nature of experience, much as the shepherd songs that close the poem do. In his description of where the action of the poem is to take place, Garcilaso is precise, but not too precise. He describes the scene:

Cerca del Tajo, en soledad amena,  
de verdes sauces hay una espesura  
toda de hiedra revestida y llena,  
que por el tronco va hasta el altura  
y así la teje arriba y encadena  
que'l sol no halla paso a la verdura;  
el agua baña el prado con sonido,  
alegrando la hierba y el oído (57-64)

Near the Tajo, in pleasant solitude,  
there is a thicket of green willows  
clothed and filled with ivy,  
that ascends the trunk to the heights  
and forms such weaves and chains  
that the sun finds no path through the green;  
the water bathes the meadow in sound,  
gladdening grass and ear

The description is explicit in its way: a secluded site along the river where ivy climbs the willows and weaves a canopy that allows no light to pass through. Of course this precision is a very complex illusion. Garcilaso goes on for three stanzas describing the qualities of his nymphs' *locus amoenus*, but the description of the site, set though it is in the geography of Castile, occupies no commensurate site in the world one might experience even if one were to walk the entire length of both riverbanks (even in Garcilaso's time). Garcilaso presents a literary Tajo to his readers, even as he places it within a political and historical world of their experience. To attempt to locate the actual site would be beside the point. As Paterson describes it, "the countryside of Toledo, with its city on the hill and the river beneath, is transformed through the imagination of the poet into no less than a Spanish Helicon, a landscape consecrated to his poetry" (89).

However, Garcilaso's Tajo is a peculiar sort of pastoral site—not only for its author's claim to situate it in a "real-world" site. As Howard Wescott observes, Garcilaso's pastoral is not caught up in longing for a past or future Golden Age, nor in some conflict between court and country. Rather, it is "an idealized landscape which serves as an emblem of the Neoplatonic belief in a harmonious universe, a version of Arcadia midway between the innocence of Eden and the human world of moral infirmity and death" (478). While Wescott is correct to note that the landscape is idealized—even to the degree that it might not have any real analogue to any site along the Tajo—too much in the poem militates against the notion that it is emblematic of any sort of harmonious universe (Garcilaso's very real Neoplatonic predilections notwithstanding). The site, fictionalized though it is, is the scene of death—possibly several deaths, as much as it is an idealized site for the creation of art. Also, the arrival of Tirreno and Alcino and their song in this landscape certainly precludes any notion of a harmonious universe or "perfect order" (478)

reflected in Nature. True, Garcilaso was not striving for a mimetic effect in his depiction of terrain and shepherds, but he was not attempting to draft a Neoplatonic Arcadia either. This *locus amoenus* functions not as mimesis of nature; nor is it nature as a flat backdrop for politics, history, or even philosophy. It is Nature as foundation for the creation of art, Nature as intertwined with art.

In the context of the poem, the intertwining of nature and art is literal. The scenes woven by the four nymphs Filódoce, Dinámene, Climene and Nise,<sup>15</sup> along with the framing scene in which they figure, constitute the textual core of Garcilaso's *Égloga Tercera*. The materials the nymphs employ for their weaving come from the natural locale itself:

Las telas eran hechas y tejidas  
del oro que'l felice Tajo envía,  
apurado después de bien cernidas  
las menudas arenas do se cría,  
y de las verdes ovas, reducidas  
en estambre sotil cual convenía  
para seguir el delicado estilo  
del oro, ya tirado en rico hilo (105-112)

The cloths were made and woven  
of the gold the happy Tajo sent,  
tossed after a good sifting  
from the fine sands where it was born,  
and from the green flax changed  
to supple yarn that served to  
follow the delicate fashion  
of gold, now fired into rich thread

Though we see nothing of the process that renders them fit for weaving, the materials themselves become the tapestries—the fabled Tajo gold, the shells of sea creatures. In this sense the continuum between art and nature is seamless. This material forms the basis for the medium that the nymphs use to tell their stories. Unlike the shepherds who arrive at the end of the poem, the

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<sup>15</sup> According to Alcina, two of the names come from Virgil, two from Sannazaro.



nymphs never speak during the section of the work pertaining to them. Rather, they tell their stories through weaving them out of the materials of their pastoral scene. The work of art is already a work of nature as well. Elias Rivers observes that the work of the nymphs is analogous to the work of the poet—as they weave together elements of nature, so Garcilaso weaves elements of text from other sources into the text of his eclogue (*Critical*, 79). The nymphs themselves occupy a space on the margins of humanity and Nature. Nymphs appear as exquisite humans, but their affinity is to natural features: rivers, groves, waterfalls. They appear in myth and legend as spirits of nature, though their form is human. It is fitting, then, that as they occupy the boundary between humanity and the natural world, so their art should reflect its position as both artificial and natural. The *ecphrasis* at the center of the eclogue concerns four scenes of death or transformation in confronting lost love. Three of the four scenes are consciously literary: they refer to scenes already set out in the work of Ovid and Virgil. However, the fourth scene, though it relies on classical tropes (as well as contemporary sources), breaks with the process to depict a scene in contemporary Spain—a scene that might well be the very spot on the banks of the Tajo the nymphs have chosen for their labors. As they depict scenes of death, or of “bodies changed” as Ovid puts it, Garcilaso explores what he shows to be rather permeable boundaries between human, nature, and art.

Philodoce’s tapestry, the first to which Garcilaso draws his readers’ eye, depicts another river scene: the Strymon, which like so much else in the eclogue, occupies the border between the sentimental pastoral and the wilderness pastoral. As Paterson notes, “its one bank [is] pleasantly pastoral and its other precipitous and inhospitable” (75). The subject of the nymph’s tapestry comes from the Fourth Book of Virgil’s *Georgics*: the death of Orpheus—a subject to which Garcilaso alluded in the very beginning of his poem. Filódoce’s tapestry shows the exact

moment Euridice was “en el blanco pie mordida / de la pequeña sierpe ponzoñosa, / entre la hierba y flores escondida (bitten on the white foot / by the tiny poisonous serpent / hidden among the grass and flowers)” (130-2). This episode is one of an encounter with unsentimental nature, with complex pastoral, the serpent among the grass and flowers. Euridice, in dying, takes metaphorical form of a flower: “descolorida...como rosa / que ha sido fuera de sazón cogida (discolored...like a rose / that has been plucked out of season” (133-4). As Mary Barnard notes, this is hardly new-coined poetry by Garcilaso. It appeared first in Ariosto, whose work Garcilaso had read, when Isabel laments the death of Zerbin and she falls “languidetta come rosa, rosa non colta in sua stagione, si che'lla impallidisca in su la siepe ombrosa” (24.80.4-6). In fact, notes Paterson (77), the entire scene comes from Prosa XII of Sannazaro’s *L’Arcadia*, in which a shepherd enters a grotto only to find a band of water nymphs working on a “marvelous tapestry” that depicts: “i miserabili casi de la deplorata Euridice; si come nel bianco piede punta dal velenoso aspide fu constretta di esalare la bella anima, e come poi per ricoprarla discese all’inferno, e ricoprata la perde la seconda volta lo smemorato marito.” Even in its depiction of death by the agent of a Nature beyond the control of the one human who could charm the beasts, Garcilaso’s work relies on close paraphrase and translation from classical and Italian texts for its content. The work is at once artificial, in Garcilaso’s reliance on a lengthy literary tradition, and Natural, in its depiction of a cruel nature by a nymph in tapestry. Orpheus “se queja al monte solitario (complains, solitary, to the mountain)” but he does it “en vano (in vain)” (144).

The classical scenes in the other nymphs’ tapestries show similar scenes of transformation during moments of grief and passion. Dinámene depicts the encounter between Apollo and Daphne, much as set out in the first book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Apollo is hunting Daphne, both having been hunted already by Cupid, who pierced the god with the

golden arrow of love, and the nymph with the lead tip of hate or disgust. Garcilaso describes the nymph as her arms become limbs, her feet become roots, her golden hair, leaves. Apollo, in turn, “llora el amante y busca el ser primero, / besando y abrazando aquel madero (the lover mourns and seeks the first being, / kissing and embracing that wood)” (161-8). The god loses the form of the nymph he loves, but kisses the tree in search of the original being. However, Garcilaso’s weaver shows that though the form is different, the connection between tree and Daphne is more important. Nymph and tree share history and matter. The form changes, but the identity does not. The nymph Dinámene, in turn, transforms them both into art, through yet another transformation: that of nature into tapestry. Climene, too, depicts a scene from the *Metamorphoses*, though this one takes place in what seems to be nearly pure wilderness: a huge mountain covered in towering trees where a boar awaits its opportunity to spill Adonis’s blood on the roses while his love Venus looks on (172). Once again, Garcilaso relies on classical text for his own, but he uses this classical work to undermine the traditional tropes of natural beauty. The rose is red through the spilled blood of Adonis, and the nymph, rather than weaving a scene of fangless beauty, depicts a tableau of blood and violence. This is not a Nature fit for the comfort of humanity, but it is a Nature fit for human production of art.

The last tapestry, by the nymph Nise, is the key to Garcilaso’s clever repurposing of the pastoral mode—in which the pastoral becomes a study of the relations between nature and art, rather than of city and country or Nature and politics or history. In this tapestry the Tajo appears for the second time, again bathing the banks near the Garcilaso’s home of Toledo, which he calls “la más felice tierra de España” (200). In another echoing of the framing story, again a group of woodland goddesses “silvestres diosas” (218) gather. However, this scene is a wilder one than the one first set of nymphs have chosen for their weaving, and these new nymphs’ activity

concerns not artistic depictions of death, but a death resulting in art. In describing the scene, Garcilaso depicts not the classical serene *locus amoenus* of the traditional pastoral, but the wild nature of the wilderness sublime:

Pintado el caudaloso rio se vía  
que en áspera estrechez reducido,  
un monte casi alrededor ceñía,  
con ímpetu corriendo y con ruido;  
quiere cercarlo todo parecía  
en su volver, mas era afán perdido;  
dejábase correr en fin derecho,  
contento de lo mucho que había hecho (201-8)

The painted rocky river went on,  
reduced to a rugged narrows,  
almost entirely encircling a mountain,  
flowing with force and roar;  
it seemed to want to encircle it all  
but it was futile effort on its return;  
it resigned at last to run straight,  
content with all it had accomplished

This torrent that rages with “force and roar” from the mountain in the dryads’ scene counters the gentle pastoral version of the Tajo Garcilaso offers his readers in the framing episode of nymphs and shepherds. If the first nymphs inhabit the pastoral, the second group appears in the realm of the sublime. Garcilaso uses the term himself, when describing the “ancient adorned palaces”(212) on the “sublime cumbre del monte (sublime summit of the mountain)” (209). In this last tapestry, Garcilaso has constructed yet another moment of dialectic opposition: this one countering the frame story. The nymphs’ pastoral and art is countered by the wilderness and death of Nise’s tapestry.

However, the setting is not the only important difference between this bit of *ecphrasis* and the ones that precede it. These differences make plain the entanglement Garcilaso perceives between art and the nature from which it is drawn. First, although Nise presents a death scene,

her tapestry does not show a history. Nor does it draw on the stock of classical tales Virgil and Ovid tell. Rather it relies for its story on Garcilaso's *First Eclogue*, in which the shepherd Nemoroso laments the death of his love Elisa in childbirth.<sup>16</sup> Alan Paterson, in noting that the fourth tapestry is "atypical," further points out that the work is in a sense "an epitome of the previous three" (86). Elisa has died, like Adonis and Eurydice, in a violent encounter that Garcilaso emphasizes through his surprising use of the word "*degollada*" ("drained of blood," but as one might do to a slaughtered animal).<sup>17</sup> Like Eurydice, the nymph has died before her time: "antes del tiempo y casi en flor cortada (cut before her time and almost in flower)" (228). Like Daphne, the forms of nature participate in Elisa's death/transformation. As the nymph's sisters strew flowers, one stands apart, carving an epitaph into the trunk of an elm tree. It is the only time Garcilaso allows the nymphs to use language rather than imagery to convey a point:

"Elisa soy, en cuyo nombre suena  
y se lamenta el monte cavernoso,  
testigo del dolor y grave pena  
en que por mí se aflige Nemoroso  
y llama 'Elisa'; 'Elisa' a boca llena  
responde el Tajo, y lleva presuroso  
al mar de Lusitania el nombre mío,  
donde será escuchado, yo lo fio" (241-8)

"I am Elisa, in whose name sounds  
and laments the cavernous mountain,  
witness of the pain and profound grief  
in which Nemoroso laments me  
and calls 'Elisa'; 'Elisa' responds the Tajo  
in full voice, and carries my name

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<sup>16</sup> Several scholars (Lapesa and Keniston among them) have found in the *First Eclogue* a thinly veiled account of Garcilaso grieving over the death of Isabel de Freyre, for whom he wrote much of his early work, and who also died in childbirth.

<sup>17</sup> The use of "*degollada*" has been the subject of much philological contention over the years, with some critics maintaining it was a mistake in transcription from "*yugulada*" (Lapesa). Brocense, for example, renders it "*yigualada*." Others contend that it is exactly the sort of shocking effect Garcilaso attempts in other work, and in any case fits with the metaphor of nymphs cut down like flowers (Alcina, note 230).

swiftly to the Lusitanian sea  
where I have faith it will be heard.”

The nymph’s inscribing of the epitaph is an analogue of Garcilaso’s work on the eclogue itself. The nymph in the tapestry immortalizes Elisa’s voice by carving it on the tree, much as the first group of nymphs does in using natural substances to weave tapestries, and in much the same way Garcilaso does in inscribing poetry on paper (also derived from trees). In doing so, Garcilaso embeds Elisa’s death in three layers of art, which in turn derive directly from nature. The epitaph refers yet again to the Orpheus myth. Although in Dinámene’s tapestry Orpheus laments Eurydice’s death to the mountain “in vain,” in the epitaph woven into Nise’s tapestry the mountain itself collaborates with Nemoroso in grieving for Elisa (242). In turn, the river responds, calling Elisa’s name, and carrying it to the Sea of Lusitania. As Trevor Dadson notes, this voice of nature calling the name of the dead nymph recalls, again, the end of Orpheus, whose head floated downriver, singing, as the forces of nature played upon it (89). The woods and the waves continue the song of lament and “se publicase de uno en uno por el húmedo reino de Neptuno ([it] was published from each to each through the watery kingdom of Neptune)” (203). In Garcilaso’s rendering of the pastoral, the divisions between city and country are secondary, and any border between nature and art is porous. Nature itself participates in the creation of art, both as raw material and as artist.

The participation of Nature in the artistic process is key to this work, and indicates a possible way of considering the encounter between nature and text without reducing one to the other or enforcing a strict boundary between them to ensure their purity. In the Garcilasan pastoral, without art there is no nature. Garcilaso’s idealized vision of the banks of the Tajo, and the tapestry scenes the nymphs weave, would be unimaginable were it not for a wide array of classical and contemporary sources. The gold of the river does not translate directly into text the

way it becomes threads for the nymphs' work. On the other hand, without nature there is no art in Garcilaso's work—not even text is possible without the presence of the tree, or the natural threads with which to weave a story. In the case of the *Égloga Tercera*, the pastoral impulse, the flight into Nature, is a flight toward the textless world of death. That flight, however, can be transformed as humans become “nature,” part of the raw material for creating art. Garcilaso learned the *Metamorphoses* well. In death as his poem portrays it, only the form changes; the matter remains to become something else. For this reason Garcilaso's pastoral aptly straddles history and nature, garden and wilderness. It must be at once pastoral and counter-pastoral, as separating text from nature, or nature from text, is the realm of oblivion. Take them apart, and there is nothing in the center, no essence to be found.

This is a pastoral that longs for a nature that is already impure, already complicit in the presence of human subjects, and an active participant in the creation of artificial art. Garcilaso's eclogue encompasses the human presence in Nature in several ways: through the presence of art-creating nymphs as proxies, though the presence of ancient stories as embedded in natural materials as art, and through the presence of humans as narrator and audience. The vision is of a historically, geographically situated site—the banks of the Tajo, which had been settled since before the arrival of the Roman legions. However, the real geography of the site is on its face idealized, cleansed of human presence (except for the divine nature spirits the Tajo-maidens)—except for narrator and audience. If wilderness is the site of human absence, then the wilderness in this text is civilized at the moment of creation. However, Garcilaso shows how Nature and human presence collaborate in the production of art. The landscape remains pure and wild as the narrator describes it to the reader, as neither ever sets foot there, but maintains a disembodied

presence. The nymphs flee the approach of Tirreno and Alcino by diving into the river where “las cristalinas ondas se cubrieron” (376), but narrator and observer remain.

The degree to which humans are present in the text, and just what they might experience in the unfolding of the text, is a key element in contemporary debates about the ability of text to represent anything that is not text—in short to represent some kind of nature “*hors du texte*.” This question of *mimesis* arises in the eclogue as well, and it serves as an introduction to a relatively recent strain in criticism: Ecocriticism. In the *Third Eclogue*, Garcilaso’s nymphs weave images that fool the eye: “tanto que al parecer el cuerpo vano / pudiera ser tomado con la mano” (271-2). Garcilaso invites the reader to imagine work so close to the original that it seems one could pick it up, but in showing us the process by which they were created, he highlights their artificial quality (even if the work is very, very good). The narrator never succumbs—and never suggests that the reader succumb—to the illusion that the representation is the thing. Here, then is one of the central concerns of ecocriticism: the degree to which the human activity of creation can refer to any world of experience it purports to represent. In much the same way that pastoral traditionally has operated at once in opposition to and in cooperation with culture and politics, so the practice of ecocriticism is in many ways a continuing manifestation of the pastoral impulse—an attempt to flee politics into nature. The following section will examine the claims of several strains of ecocriticism, and explore the ways this critical school operates within what is at base the pastoral mode. A critique of some aspects of this movement within criticism follows.

### **Nature into Art**

To the extent that ecocritics seek to remove value from the realm of the human and place it in the terrain of uncreated nature, (in particular in pristine wilderness), they follow a pastoral



impulse. That is, in much the same way that literary works in the pastoral mode set up a critique of (especially urban) culture more or less overt or implicit, ecocriticism as a practice turns from the word to the world in pursuit of an aesthetics of contact with nature, an encounter they find “truer” than any encounters limited to the world of mere signs. This critical movement is yet another attempt to fly from history and politics into nature. Like its pastoral predecessor, however, ecocriticism encounters many of the same obstacles inherent in using language to apprehend the world of experience. In a bit of irony, a critical movement that begins highly critical of the pathway along which modern science has developed, in several cases has ended up relying on science and the scientific method (particularly as practiced in Ecology) to provide an ontological foundation for its literary and critical observations. This section begins with the ecocritical discussion of the scientific method, with a focus on the radical shift many such critics locate in the Renaissance. Then it will take up the work of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, the originator of “Deep Ecology,” perhaps the most radical of the ecocritical approaches. A discussion of the more anthropocentric approach of Hans Jonas follows, and then a survey of efforts to reconnect word and world, without falling into the traps of naïve *mimesis* or scientism. The effort to save nature from modern science, and to recover the world from the net of language often finds itself embracing both science and language to further its project. As in the pastoral, *rus* must embrace *urbs*, and nature must embrace art, if both entities and concepts are to continue.

Any effort to promote respect for and contact with nature outside of the world of text requires at least a working definition of the concept. If the set of matter-energy<sup>18</sup> relations that

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<sup>18</sup> I borrow this term from Manuel DeLanda’s *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, as it is useful shorthand for referring to the close ties and relations of exchange between matter and energy.

underlie the world of human experience have not changed very much over the millennia, the way in which humans have categorized—and continue to categorize—those relations has changed. In short, “nature,” as encompassing material relations constantly in flux, has changed little, while “Nature” has. One of the principal difficulties in pinning down nature as an ontological category is that, in a sense, it is an attempt to define everything that is. As R.G. Collingwood explains in *The Idea of Nature*: “if things are what exist in space and time, nature is not only real, but it is the only reality, for it is precisely the totality of things, the realm of thinghood” (124). Of course, Collingwood’s definition begs two questions: what is a *thing*, and what is it to *exist*? To answer that question the Greeks relied on the concept of *physis*, or the birth or becoming of all things. Though now the term tends to refer to the process of emergent form inherent in matter, the definition of *physis* has changed through the centuries, becoming roughly synonymous with the Latin *Natura* or English “Nature.” As Louis Dupré explains, the term originally comprised elements that now would be classified as artificial, or human-made: “the earliest Ionian concept of *physis* had combined a physical (in the modern sense!) with an anthropic and a divine component” (3). C.S. Lewis suggests that *physis* first drew its definition from Platonist philosophy, in which *physis* stood for all things subject to change—the world of phenomena rather than the realm of the true, perfect, unchanging forms. However, if nature is simply everything that one can experience—antelopes, humans, mountains, badgers, thoughts, gods and diamonds—then it becomes difficult to say anything of value about it: “When we say that any particular thing is part of nature... we know no more about it than before” (37). In Aristotle’s work *physis* came to have a much different meaning, in which the things come to be on their own, and not everything that exists is part of it. (Mathematics, for example, is unchangeable, but

not independent, and so is not part of *physis*.)<sup>19</sup> That is, *physis* retained its definition as a principle of change, but that emergent form was inherent in matter rather than derived from eternal forms not subject to change.<sup>20</sup> Later definitions of Christian thought set God outside the realm of *physis* as its creator, and he can manipulate it as He sees fit. Most recently, some strains of criticism have attempted to separate humans and language from the realm of emergent form. It is against these trends that the ecocritics react.

Many critics—and many of those who do not style themselves “ecocritics”—trace the reduction of nature to inert matter to the Renaissance, the same period that saw a shift in the pastoral from verse at least partially descriptive of life outside urban centers, to nature deployed in literature as a more or less explicit critique of culture. Many writers who trace the shift in the status of nature to the Renaissance posit a period from prehistory through the medieval period in which Nature was held to be something other than inert and subject to human will. Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant, for example, posits a prehistoric relation to nature in which “human beings have lived in daily, immediate, organic relation with the natural order for their sustenance” (*Nature*, 1). In similar fashion, Max Oelschlaeger traces a progression from a prehistoric life in harmony with nature, through a classical period that saw nature as cornucopia, fit for the sustenance of humanity, to a modern period which considers nature inert matter. By the late twentieth century this concept of nature as inert, unchangeable material had come to

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis goes on to add that that entity which is unchangeable and does exist on its own is God, for all practical purposes—the unmoved mover.

<sup>20</sup> The present study hews most closely to the Aristotelian definition, though informed in some ways by Martin Heidegger, his student Hans Jonas, Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda. Nature in this sense is a principle of change and becoming—the principle by which the entities humans perceive as discrete in space and time become other things. It is an open set of dynamic, nonlinear relations, the whole of which is greater than the sum of its parts, through which change becomes manifest.

apply to Nature as a category as well, so that reference to Nature in literature came to be viewed as naïve (at best) or dangerous essentializing.

However, the concept of Nature itself has shifted from the earliest definitions, and in some periods Nature was defined by its instability rather than by any unchanging (or unchangeable) essence. Gregory Stone, for example, observes that although many researchers in the humanities consider the concept of nature as a fixed, transhistorical means of justifying an oppressive status quo, “one of the predominant premodern senses of ‘natural’ is precisely the opposite” (5). That is: “Medieval thinkers start with the assumption that nature is variable, unstable, already ready to alter” (10). Nature (including “human nature”) in this sense has more in common with the *physis* of Aristotle: an ever-changing “becoming” that is constantly in flux, than with any conception of the natural as an unchanging justification of “fitness” or “properness.” However, this conception of Nature as creative, in flux, subject to change, did not last. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the world of ever-changing nature, of sensory experience of nature, had begun to give way to a scientific evaluation of nature that set aside as irrelevant what it called “secondary qualities.” Oelschlaeger notes the distinction between the world as it is experienced, and the world as it is captured in science, without qualities: “(Galileo’s) world of nature is explicitly not a world of concrete experience: the objects he observed were tasteless, colorless, odorless, soundless” (78). Certainly some philosophers of the period, Giordano Bruno for example, turned to a sort of vitalistic pantheism, Louis Dupré observes. In Bruno’s assessment, matter is divine—not merely the passive stuff through which form works out its *telos*. “Bruno turns it into an active principle through which the *natura naturata* unfolds itself into innumerable individual substances, spiritual as well as corporeal” (67). For Bruno and his later disciple Baruch Spinoza, “the being of the cosmos is no less than a disclosure of God’s being” (252).

However, Bruno and Spinoza's views convinced the majority. As Robert Watson explains, the scientific method as founded during the Renaissance brushed away the notion of a Nature or matter capable of acting on its own: "The Rock is a rock. If it seems to move or morph, check the curvature of the lens or posit volcanic activity; if it emits a torrent of water, look beneath it for a rain-fed spring" (23). With the rise of modern science, contend these writers, Nature became inert—a resource to be worked by human intention, or dominated by human will. To enter nature was to enter the realm of the inert, subject to physical force and human manipulation.

It is not surprising, then, that Arne Naess, the originator of Deep Ecology, turns to the line of thought pursued by Bruno and Spinoza to form the basis of what he calls Ecosophy T. As opposed to "shallow" ecology, which seeks to preserve nature as a resource for human exploitation, Deep Ecology seeks a non-anthropocentric (some would say ecocentric) view of the world—including texts. "The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes" he argues. "The term 'life' is used here in a comprehensive, non-technical [manner] to refer also to things biologists may classify as non-living: rivers (watersheds), landscapes, cultures, ecosystems, 'the living earth'" (29). Naess based much of his philosophy on the work of Spinoza—in particular his contention that God and Nature are one substance: *Deus sive Natura*. As such, any division between mind and substance was illusory; both matter and the mind that contemplates it are part of the same natural world. For Spinoza, nature is both *natura naturans*, nature as maker, and *natura naturata*: nature as passive product, the site or subject of change. "By God, I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence" (I, d.6).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I refer to Spinoza's *Ethics* by part, definition, axiom, and proof for ease of reference.

Naess's philosophy also relies on Spinoza's concept of *conatus*, by which a thing wants to preserve, extend, and realize its essence through joyful connection with other things: *in suo esse perseverare conatur* (iii, prop 6). Naess conceives an ecological self which expands by increasing identification with what is not-oneself—from self to loved ones, to other humans, to animals, to all life, to inanimate matter. Even discrete entities are only handy constructions for talking about open sets of relations. Michael Zimmerman writes in his analysis of Naess's "The World of Concrete Contents" that for Naess, not even things exist as static, discrete objects. "If internally related phenomena lack substance, essence, or self-existence, as suggested by the Buddhist formula *sarvam dharmam nihsvabhavam*, there is no ultimate ontological gap between self and not-self, humanity and nature" (123).<sup>22</sup> According to Naess, this follows from Spinoza's argument that there is but one absolutely infinite matter of which any entity is merely a mode—a temporary, unstable set of relations. The realization of Nature's will is simply the realization of one's own *conatus*. *Il n'y a pas de hors-nature*: "We are not outside the rest of nature and therefore cannot do with it as we please without changing ourselves" (*Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* 165).

In Naess's thought there is a clear pastoral impulse, in the sense at least of the sentimental pastoral. Nature, or a deep understanding of the environment, is considered a way of escaping the world of human value. Naess's vision of a way of life humans have abandoned or lost, while not an explicit Arcadia of the pastoral sort, certainly relies on conceptions of a prehistorical past in which humans and nature coexisted much more closely. "Human beings, until quite recently, have been hunters and gatherers, that is, lived and worked in nature. Much less than one per cent of our history has been devoted to the attempt to live a life characterised

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<sup>22</sup> Naess owes a debt here to Mahayana Buddhism and to Martin Heidegger.

by machines and crowded quarters” (178). Naess observes that much outdoor recreation is a reenactment of the kinds of activities that characterize hunter/gatherer cultures. This summoning of a distant prehistoric past in harmony with Nature (or, at least, in greater harmony with it) is a clear attempt to escape the human realm of history. Naess’s ecosophy is a call for a “return” to that kind of coexistence with the natural world—as opposed to the contemporary urban world of politics, culture, and history that sets itself against Nature.

Naess also asserts that it is not necessary to accept his formulation fully in order to call oneself a Deep Ecologist. He called his own formulation “Ecosophy T” to show that it should hold no special preeminence among other possible ecosophies, and to indicate that several others were possible.<sup>23</sup> This makes for a rather fragmented movement. However, although Max Oelschlaeger is right to contend that “[D]eep Ecology is more a collection of diverse ideas than a well-defined paradigm” (301), there are touchstones for what Naess called the Deep Ecology movement, and he tried to encompass the broad areas of agreement in the “Deep Ecology Platform” he and William Sessions drafted during a hiking trip in 1984. The platform is as follows:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.

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<sup>23</sup> Also, the title commemorates the name of the hut in the Norwegian wild, Tvergastein, where he worked on much of his writing.

6. Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement" (1986)

Naess's purpose in producing this document was not to establish a set of beliefs for would-be Deep Ecologists. Instead, it was an effort to describe, as broadly as possible, the areas of agreement among those with an interest in promoting Deep Ecology both as a way of perceiving the world and as a basis for action. As a touchstone, the platform makes explicit the two general principles that Warwick Fox discerns in Deep Ecology: the position that "deeper" questioning of human existence leads to an ecocentric point of view, and the position that every thing that is seeks to maximize its self-realization. Roderick Nash argues that this right of self-realization applies to humans as much as to the rest of the world, but only as much as it applies to the rest of the world, and no more. "Rivers had a right to be (or function as) rivers, mountains to be mountains, wolves to be wolves, and, the deep ecologists frankly admitted, humans to be humans" (147). Nash does not note the irony of Naess's neo-pastoral flight from the artificial into the natural: escape from the human-made, if it is to be complete, necessitates curtailing the human being (see provision five). If restricting the artificial is necessary to save the Earth, then it requires restricting the presence of humans. The shepherds have to disappear from the pastoral—along with the narrator and the reader.

This requirement presents a problem. As Nash observes: "wolves and maples and mountains do not petition for their rights. Human beings are the moral agents who have the responsibility to articulate and defend the rights of the other occupants of the planet" (10). This,



of course, is one of the central tensions of the pastoral: that the rural or wilderness idyll relies on culture and the city to make it possible, even as the former entails an implied critique of the latter. Lawrence Buell construes the role of ecocriticism as a sort of engagement with and bridging of nature and culture: “to reimagine textual representations as having a dual accountability to matter and to discursive meditation” (*The Environmental Imagination* 92). In the face of much criticism,<sup>24</sup> Buell argues that if it is to grapple with any posited world outside of the text, ecocriticism must revisit the question of *mimesis*, specifically, “the importance of a post-poststructuralist account of environmental *mimesis*”:

for a critical practice that operates from a premise of bidirectionality, imagining texts as gesturing outward toward the material world notwithstanding their constitution as linguistic, ideological, cultural artifacts that inevitably filter and even in some respects grotesquify their renditions of the extratextual. (“Insurgency” 706)

Buell is careful not to assert a one-to-one relationship between text and environment. Texts, he explains, “are refractions of physical environments and human interaction with those environments... but most definitely not sameness” (*Imagination* 30, 32). However, Buell considers humanity as “inescapably biohistorical” entities whose self-construction derives, “at least partially, through encounter with physical environments they cannot not inhabit” (“Insurgency” 699). Any work of artifice humanity can derive, therefore, rests on a material—even natural—foundation. Buell suggests some criteria for deciding whether a text qualifies as “environmental”:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history...
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest...
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s orientation...
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or given is at least implicit in the text. (*Imagination* 7-8)

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<sup>24</sup> The work of Dana Phillips, especially, takes Buell to task for naïve mimeticism.

Though Buell's list is one useful way of approaching an environmental text, it is in a sense beside the point: no text is more environmental than any other. Ecocriticism may work better as a practice than as a set of works that bear similar characteristics. After all, a text in which the human interest purports to be "paramount" might make for a very interesting ecocritical read indeed—much as works in which the concerns of colonizing nations seem to be most important might make for very interesting postcolonial analyses. Buell's emphasis here is on the human as part of the ecosystem, and subject to its fluxes. Most glaringly absent from Buell's list are overtly political considerations. In this respect, Buell becomes a target for Deep Ecologists.

For some ecocritics—in particular those who ascribe to Deep Ecology's aesthetics of contact and action—Buell is far too timid. For these critics, the realm of signs is all but irrelevant in comparison with their apocalyptic vision of the future of nature and humanity. Kate Soper's observation is perhaps most indicative of both the tone and the content of this strain of ecocriticism:

In short, it is not language that has a hole in the ozone layer; and 'real' things continue to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier. Hence the inclination to respond to the insistence on the textuality of nature [...] by claiming to refute it with straightforward realist kick, by pointing to the latest oilspill or figures on species extinction and saying, 'there's nature fouled and destroyed by human industry, and I refute your anti-naturalism thus.' This is an understandable response to those who would have us focus only on the play of the 'sign' of nature. (124)

Soper's call to environmental action is based at least in part on some conception of language in reference to nature, not cut off from it. In Soper's estimation, among others, to dither with language play is not only silly; it is suicidal. This strain of ecocriticism focuses on the primacy of the contact of the human subject with nature, and seeks a sort of unmediated encounter with the nonhuman. It is an impulse familiar to students of pastoral—the attempt to flee the world of illusion, of artifice, of culture, for the simpler, truer truths of the natural world. In a recent

polemic in ecocriticism's flagship journal: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (ISLE), Ken Robisch exhorts his readers to "do something useful to someone outside the academy" (698). Robisch, like many of his colleagues, is deeply suspicious of the notion that what ecocriticism lacks is a sufficient theoretical base. His article is a frank assault of Simon Estok's suggestion that ecocriticism adopt a more theoretical framework to enable it to engage in conversation with other, theoretically based schools of critical theory. If constructivists are able to persuade ecocritics to resort to theory rather than to engage in real world politics, Robisch claims, then ecocriticism has lost. Theory, Robisch writes, "accepts, without resistance, that a rhizome is a plateau is an animal is a text"<sup>25</sup> (704). Robisch explicitly places the value of the physical, somatic encounter with the world of lived experience above that of the encounter with mere text:

Every poststructuralist or culture maven who denies the existence of wilderness or nature should be dropped ten days into the Frank Church Wilderness with a knife and made to find his or her way out. Then I'll be glad to hold some food and water behind my back and have a long conversation about theory and epistemology until the survivor acknowledges the representational value of words like 'giardia' and 'mullein' and 'grizzly bear' and 'shelter.' Hypothermia's a great way to theorize ecophobia. (705)

There is something a bit sadistic about Robisch's wilderness fantasies here, and of course the envisioned "debate" is not altogether convincing. One might, for example, withhold food and water from a critic—or even a layman—until the survivor *renounces* the representational value of words. Though Robisch is making a polemical point here, he also is touching on an important aspect of the continuity of mind and nature—the effect of environment on mind. As any emergency medical technician can testify, the mind of a subject who is dehydrated, hypothermic, subject to altitude sickness or lack of oxygen, is a very different mind than one operating under

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<sup>25</sup> Robisch's swipe at Deleuze and Guattari here certainly results from a misreading of their work. It is by no means clear that Deleuze and Guattari would accept Robisch's equation—at least in the essentializing sense that he presents it.

conditions of plenty. The kind of effect an oxygen, food, or water-deprived human is apt to have on the environment is subsequently quite different. A poetic effect in the speech may be possible, but intentional literature or accurate representation of the world of lived experience surely is a longshot. It is true that, as Robisch claims, “Fescue doesn’t grow because a quasi-theorist developed a sufficient discourse community to make it so” (706). However, this observation begs the questions of what exactly are the necessary conditions for fescue to grow, whether text can have anything to say about it, and whether text even can refer to the collection of matter-energy relations called “fescue” in English, instead of to a set of textual definitions.

In an extraordinary bit of irony, some ecocritics attempting to flee the human realm of complicated artifice for the pastoral hills of simpler, truer nature, find that in order to establish the representational relationship between literature and nature they are thrown back into the realm of the human: the practice of science. As Michael P. Cohen explains, “At bottom, ecocriticism needs to import scientific authority in order to combat two positions, 1) that culture can be a refuge from nature, and 2) that nature is merely a cultural construction” (9). Glen A. Love is perhaps the most prominent of the proponents of a rapprochement between science (biology and ecology in particular) and literature:

Ecocriticism urges its practitioners into interdisciplinarity, into science. Literature involves interrelationships, and ecological awareness enhances and expands our sense of interrelationships to encompass nonhuman as well as human contexts. Ecological thinking about literature requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture. (“Science, Anti-Science” 562)

According to Love, the underlying theory for ecocriticism should not be based in any humanistic or critical theoretical study, but in evolutionary theory (which not coincidentally also underlies the science of Ecology). Science, Love contends, is the best discourse humans have devised for tying representation to something outside of a system of signs—to something “outside text.”

Science is “exalted,” Love maintains, because it has “been successful in discovering something of how nature works” (“Science, Anti-Science” 70). The application of science to the practice of literature, however, raises some problems. The first is the amateurish misapplication of scientific terminology or research to the field of literature. Simply to choose a recent example and a small quibble, Robisch equates “nature” with “biosphere” (“despite sophists’ attempts to destroy the connection”) (699). Of course, the biosphere only describes that comparatively small portion of nature that sustains life. It does not encompass, for example, high altitudes or very low depths—or, for that matter, the universe, subject to the same sets of chemical/biological relations.<sup>26</sup> The pastoral impulse of this ecocritical strain throws the escape of human culture back on to that most human of cultural practices: the pursuit of science. After all, if, as Love suggests, science is the best way to represent nature, and the representation of nature is of the highest importance, then why should critics not drop the study of text and pursue some branch of empirical science? The question remains then about the degree to which nature—or representations of it—can afford humanity an escape from culture. Ecocriticism remains mired in the same old problem of pastoral—the idea that nature writing is never really about nature at all.

### **Art into Nature**

At the heart of the most prominent critiques of ecocriticism as a practice is the question whether there is such a thing as “nature” at all. From that doubt spring several other uncertainties: if nature can be said to exist in some form, what kind of “thing” is it? And can text say anything at all about this “nature” with any degree of trustworthiness? Some of the fiercest

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<sup>26</sup> To further illustrate the peril of dragooning scientific terms into the service of representational literature, Robisch also refers to ecosystems as “erased” rather than transformed (702), and alludes to the fixed, essential nature of the definition of ecosystems (as opposed to a purely human construction) (704). This is not to pick on Robisch, who clearly knows his subject, but even critics who know their subject can err when it comes to science.

criticism stems from the allegation that ecocriticism is at once naïve, smug, and provincial. In her article “Is Nature Necessary?” Kris Fresonke accuses ecocriticism of being “[a]historical, antiscientific, sentimental, and besotted with its own ethics” before bashing it for its naïve insistence that nature is not constructed in the texts ecocritics love the most (136). Though she does not use the term, or make the connection explicitly, Fresonke sees much of the movement as a manifestation of a sentimental pastoral impulse—a “resistance to urbanity—both in the sense of being citified and being sophisticated”

[I]t is... a form of provincialism. It moves Americans, even in their conquest over nature, to want to mimic nature’s localism and crudity. It bars irony and instead brings in fraud...It cannot found a school of literature, or a school of criticism, or a country. It cannot be loved. Obscure and illegible, mean and dirty, immovable and unmoved, nature fails us, again and again and again. (142)

Fresonke’s assessment of nature and ecocriticism is precisely the sort of formulation that would give Robisch and Love, among others, fits. She dismisses even the notion that ecocriticism could adopt the sort of irony pastoral does so well—a recognition that the urban center is necessary for this artificial portrait of the natural world. Ecocriticism’s obsession with an aesthetics of contact with lived experience, according to Fresonke, “leads at best to snobbery (why aren’t Alan Liu’s boots *muddy*?) and at worst to disingenuous evangelical eco-nonsense, all mood and no matter” (136). This section will consider those critics who find in ecocriticism a distasteful, naïve, or even dangerous approach that may do more harm than good to environmental causes by abandoning a theoretical approach for an illusory referentiality.

In referencing his not-at-all-muddy boots, Fresonke was reminding readers of one of the more contentious statements in ecocriticism: Alan Liu’s line: “There is no nature” from his work *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (38). The line has become a rallying cry for both proponents of theory and its detractors. It is important to bear in mind, however, that not all advocates of

theory are detractors of ecocriticism. Many, among them Neil Evernden, see the value of theory for approaching the interaction of text and nature. Evernden made almost the exact statement as Liu several years earlier, and it raised no commensurate outcry. As he explains in *The Social Construction of Nature*, “It is fair to say that before the word was invented there *was* no nature” (89). In positing this, Evernden is not suggesting that the set of relations—the “entities and phenomena”—did not exist, but instead that people were not aware of them as a discrete entity under one heading. The tension between nature and culture, which Evernden, like many others, traces to the Renaissance, stems from a mistaken dualism that “cannot actually be resolved *because it never existed*...One might even say that there is no ‘nature,’ and there never has been” (99). Opposed to this essentialized conception of nature as singular, static, entity, Evernden turns to a Heideggerian discourse about the singularity of things before they became “nature.” “To contemplate actually *letting something be* is very nearly beyond our ability” he writes (130). On the contrary, to assign something to the category of Nature (including humanity) “is to submit it to domination and control” (132).

As an antidote of sorts, Evernden calls for an encounter with nature as if it were the first time, while they were still individual unities, manifolds, sets of phenomena, matter-energy relations, and not standing reserve drained of individual identity, lumped under the category “Nature” and pressed into service in the realm of signs that may not have any reference at all to a world outside the text (110). Most important, Evernden suggests, is the recognition of an other—that is an entity outside of our control. “To encounter the wild other, to greet another ‘I am,’ is to accept the other’s existence in one’s life world...The experience of genuine otherness, the frog in the pond or the bird in the tree, discloses one’s own existence” (112). Evernden’s position, then, is one in favor of theory—but pressed into service in the analysis of texts in tension with nature.

Readers must at once be aware of the degree to which Nature has a conceptual history, without ever losing sight of the fact that simply because we are unaware of an entity or set of relations does not mean that it does not exist, or have an effect on our world. “The other reveals the self,” he suggests (112).

This question of the other, however, may be even more tenuous than Evernden is willing to accept. Dana Phillips, whose work *The Truth of Ecology* scandalized many ecocritics with its scathing critique, also maintains that there is something outside of the text. However, whether this outside serves as a legitimate refuge from the artificial human world of culture is extremely doubtful. “I think there is a beyond of literature,” he writes. “There is, for example, nature. I just think that nature cannot deliver one from the constraints of culture, any more than culture can deliver one from the constraints of nature” (“Ecocriticism” 585). At heart is the question of the realness of nature—at least as it is rendered in text. In particular, Phillips considers the representational tendency in ecocriticism a serious flaw. If *mimesis* is the goal of nature writing and environmental criticism, then there is little for critical theorists to do, Phillips contends: “if ecocriticism limits itself to reading realistic texts realistically, its practitioners may be reduced to an umpire's role, squinting to see if a given description of a painted trillium or a live oak tree is itself well-painted and lively” (“Ecocriticism” 586). This tendency, Phillips argues, leads to an endless stream of kitsch and “criticism” in praise of it—the critical equivalent of prints of realistic nature scenes. Ecocriticism, writes Phillips, requires a theoretical framework, not an adopted attitude or a set of shared aesthetic likes and dislikes. Just as a taste for outdoor sports does not make one an ecologist, nor an affection for reading make a literary critic, “[i]t should follow, then, that enjoying a good read about hiking or canoeing and sharing one's enthusiasm in lecture or print does not make one an ecocritic” (“Ecocriticism” 582). Nor, Phillips adds, does



ecocriticism depend “on the question of whether or not there is an inherent relation of resemblance between literature and nature”:

Whatever relation of resemblance there may be is external, a matter of convention; and we are perfectly free to treat it with skepticism if we like, without surrendering our credentials as ecocritics, and without calling our environmental ethics into question. (*Truth of Ecology* 144)

In fact, for Phillips, part of the danger of ecocriticism lies in its tendency to romanticize nature—in particular the kind of romanticizing that views nature as a vital, self-determining, independent presence. Phillips singles out Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* for special criticism, dismissing Merchant’s contention that “the pre-modern, pre-Renaissance era affords a model of an organic society with a maternal earth at its center, and that this is a workable model to which we ought to consider returning” (*Truth*, 112). Such speculative history Phillips derides as “essentialist” and warns: “in this model of history, the ecosystem functions largely as a master trope, just as such abstractions as the gods, the nation, the race, and the people, or great men and the women who stand behind them, sometimes do in other versions of history” (*Truth*, 113). Much like Evernden, Phillips warns that some formulations of ecocriticism rely on totalizing narratives as pernicious as others subject to postmodern critique and dismantling.

One of the principal dangers, Phillips notes, is exactly the kind of nature-culture continuum proposed by Naess and some of the Deep Ecology-minded ecocritics. Those who want to practice ecocriticism, Phillips suggests, would do well to remember that nature and culture are separate, “and that maintaining the distinction and keeping the distance, is probably a good idea” (*Truth* 149). That is, the pastoral impulse to flee to nature, to pretend that nature and culture are quasi-Spinozan manifestations of the same underlying matter, is illusory. “Poetry is not a manifestation of landscape and climate, or of anything else, for that matter, apart from the conscious decisions and unconscious motivations of poets, and the structural and aesthetic

effects of the genres and languages in which they write,” Phillips contends. “To suppose otherwise is occult” (*Truth* 156). Phillips offers a bit of a straw man here, as he does not cite a critic who claims that landscape and climate manifest themselves in poetry. It is likely, in fact, that many of his critical targets would agree with his assessment. However, the critical intent here is not to indict any one critic or set of critics, but to disrupt any illusory continuum between nature and culture. Responsibility for any continuum, however, does not rest solely on the side of the nature-worshippers. Postmodern theorists who claim the end of nature, that all has become culture, also posit a totalizing monism, though from the opposite pole. Rather than claiming everything depends on nature, they claim that only culture is possible. “Obviously the claim that culture has subsumed nature, and may have eradicated it entirely, is unsupported by the available evidence, and fails to take into account the actual state of the natural world today” (*Truth* 28). Phillips uses the example of recent campaigns against coyotes to illustrate what he calls postmodernists’ failure to recognize that attempts to impose human will on nature are not as efficient or as predictable as some would like to claim (*Truth* 28). The coyotes are classified as nuisance animals and hunted, but they are spreading rapidly eastward nonetheless. Barbed language aside, Phillips seems to suggest that ecocriticism is possible, and may even be worthwhile. However, as a discipline it would have to stop “squinting at the landscape,” pretending that words match things and that text relies on nature. In short, it needs theory that recognizes the limits of language to represent the natural world.

Timothy Morton attempts to offer that kind of theory in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), in which he further develops the line of critical thought that highlights the emptiness of Nature as a conceptual and ontological category. Ecocriticism, writes Morton, is “a form of postmodern retro”: assaulting culture, but pointedly ignoring recent developments in theory (20). As the other

more constructivist critics before him, however, Morton is very careful to remind his readers that he does not believe that only the text is real:

Some will accuse me of being a postmodernist, by which they will mean that I believe the world is made of text, that there is nothing real. Nothing could be further from the truth. The idea of nature is all too real, and it has an all too real effect upon all too real beliefs, practices and decisions on the real world. True, I claim that there is no such 'thing' as nature, if by nature we mean some thing that is single, independent and lasting. But deluded ideas and ideological fixation do exist. (19)

Morton's ecocritical approach, a stance he terms (not without a dash of irony) "Dark Ecology," is an effort to do away with the "deluded ideas and ideological fixations" he perceives as inherent in the concept of Nature. Morton is not claiming that matter-energy relations do not exist, but rather that the category of nature is an impediment to an understanding of both world and text. The pastoral flight into nature is a flight into kitsch, he explains: "'Ecology without nature' could mean 'ecology without a *concept* of the natural'" (24). Unlike critics with an affinity for Deep Ecology, Morton locates the problem not in the Renaissance, but in the Romantic period, in which the category of Nature became, like Art, "a way of healing what modern society has damaged" (22). The damage has separated the subject from the object, and humanity finds itself alienated from the world. "Contact with nature, and with the aesthetic, will mend the bridge between subject and object" (22). This longing for contact with nature is a problem for ecocriticism as it is for all nature writing, Morton contends, because Nature is "an arbitrary rhetorical construct," with no independent existence outside of the text (21). The concept of Nature, in this sense, is similar to the concept of Self—a long series of components, none of which adequately constitutes a self. The same holds for Nature: "Wherever we look for it, we encounter just a long metonymic string of bunnies, trees, stars, space, toothbrushes, skyscrapers... of course, where the list ends is telling" (175).

The end of the list is telling, because it sets the boundary of what constitutes legitimate contact with “Nature.” Morton follows Hegel in positing “a world beyond the text that language cannot reach. It is empirically real, but we are deaf to it—an ironically material version of the Berkeleyan tree, falling without ears to hear it” (131). However, despite the inability of humans to perceive this empirical nature, some writers continue to try to represent it in text (or visual art, music, etc.). This is a form of bad faith Morton terms “ecomimesis,” and it is the primary flaw at the core of nature writing and much ecocriticism. Morton relies in part on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* for his concept: “As soon as the artifact wants to prompt the illusion of the natural, it founders” (179). Ecomimesis is an attempt to do away with subject-object duality as mediated by language. According to Morton, episodes of metonymic list-making in descriptions of the subject in Nature are attempts to eliminate the *phatic* or medial quality of language.

Nature writing tries to be ‘immediate’—to do without the processes of language and the artful construction of illusions. It wants to maintain the impression of directness. But this can only be a supreme illusion, ironically, in a world in which one can find Coke cans in Antarctica. The immediacy that nature writing values is itself as reified as a Coke can. (125)

Morton does not note this, but there is a further irony inherent in nature writing: the more effective it is, the more of a lie—an illusion—it is. So the better the writing, the worse it is, paradoxically, for both Nature and the subject-reader. Morton argues that ecomimesis creates the illusion of shared space between writer and reader. It is what he calls the “As I write...” trope.<sup>27</sup> In writing of a snowstorm, one imagines oneself to be experiencing it as well—whether one’s experience of snowstorms is somatic and historical or purely textual.<sup>28</sup> Though Morton claims

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<sup>27</sup> “As I write, I’m watching the smoke rise from a thousand Parisian chimneys,” or “As I write, a coyote is eating my dinner...”

<sup>28</sup> Morton, here, does not account for the reader’s imagination. A shared textual space does not obviate the actual set of relations holding at the moment the text is read. A reader or writer might claim to be producing or reading a particular passage at the North Pole, in between acts at the

nature writing wants to make the reader love nature, it works against the concept of ecology: “By setting up nature as an object ‘over there’—a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact—it re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish” (125). Of course, Nature is necessarily set up as a concept “over there”—that is, other than the human. However, it is possible to conceive of a Nature both “over there” and close at hand. Morton’s claim that some ecocritics posit “reality” as “solid, veridical and independent” (30) is not really the point. If pressed, even Morton’s worst offenders likely would concede that reality is none of these. Nor is the discussion about whether one can better experience reality or read about it particularly useful. It is better to do both: that is, to experience it *and* read about it. Language furthers, confirms, addresses experience, embodied as it is as well in agents of flesh and bone.

Morton’s development of “Dark Ecology” is an attempt to destroy the notion of Nature as a distant, independent realm of redemption for alienated human subjects. The Nature humans are able to encounter in text, and the various sets of relations one encounters in environments of lived experience are too implicated in the world of the human for either to be located anywhere other than close to the human subject—Morton might even argue *within* the human subject as text. Humanity’s reaction to Nature should not be one of romanticized love, awe, or connection, but one of fear and horror of what it has made, and what its creation now demands. “[I]f a poisoned rainforest could speak, it would sound like Frankenstein’s creature” (195). That is, we must respond to the Nature we find—even if it is the one we have made, and even if we find it monstrous. The determining factor for whether we respect a thing we classify as “natural” is not its independence from humanity, but whether we are responsible for it. “Dark Ecology

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Metropolitan Opera, or at a café on the Left Bank. However, such claims do not change the actual relation between reader, comfortable chair, climate-controlled office, and partially-imbibed cup of coffee (to produce a partial metonymic list). Such efforts frequently are not ecomimetic efforts to generate love for “Nature.”

undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature. It preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe. Instead of whistling in the dark, insisting that we're part of Gaia, why not stay with the dark?" (187). We are responsible for what we have marred, perhaps even to a greater degree than we are for what we find. This question of uncertainty coupled with responsibility, for the "Nature" we create, forms the basis of a possible avenue for approaching the natural realm without crafting yet another totalizing, essentializing master narrative to press into service against difference. As Morton notes, the set of matter-energy relations is real. The only tool humanity has to come to terms with it is text.

### **The Song of the Shepherds**

Deep Ecologists call for a pastoral escape from the human into the realm of Nature. In turn, other critics mock this pastoral impulse as doomed to failure, and call for liberation from the master narrative of Nature. Naess relies on the work of Martin Heidegger for some of his own thought, and critics of Deep Ecology rely on Heidegger's critical progeny to call into question the concept of Nature. However, it falls to one of Heidegger's students, Hans Jonas, to show both that nature exists, and that an escape from human modes of perspective and value not only is not possible, but also not desirable in a program of preserving it. It is, as Jonas shows, impossible to save one without the other. Jonas is not a Deep Ecologist by any stretch of the definition. However, Jonas's work provides a basis for understanding the human perspective on the preservation of nature. Escaping a human vantage point for looking on the world is impossible, so the question turns to what that vantage point means for nature and the possibility of preserving and caring for it.

This care must obviously include care for the future of all nature on this planet as a necessary condition of man's own. Even if it were less than necessary in this instrumental

sense—even if (science-fiction style) a human life worthy of its name were imaginable in a depleted nature mostly replaced by art—it might still hold that the plenitude of life, evolved in aeons of creative toil and now delivered into our hands, has a claim to our care in its own right. (136)

In Jonas's investigations, the idea that humans might abandon their special role in shepherding Nature is absurd. Humanity alone, he writes, can assume responsibility for the survival of the rest of the world, and because it can assume such responsibility, Jonas writes, it must: "man has nothing over other living beings, except in that he alone can have responsibility for them" (98). Because humanity has the power to wreck nature—and in so doing, any form of humanity recognizable as such—humanity is responsible for its self-preservation and for the preservation of Nature. The survival of each depends on the survival of the other: "First comes the 'ought to be' of the object, second the 'ought to do' of the subject who, in virtue of his power, is called to its care" (93). In Jonas's formulation, humans must accept that they have already been thrown into Nature (and nature), and because of it they bear a responsibility for it. Unlike Naess's work, Jonas's thought does not equate God, humanity and Nature. However, the three concepts (and the ontological categories that pertain to them) are tangled in such a way that extricating any one element would be disastrous for the other two. Jonas reaches his conclusions through a series of investigation of science and nature heavily informed by the work of his teacher, Martin Heidegger. However, Jonas comes to accuse Heidegger of Gnosticism—of forsaking the possibility of humility and responsibility for despair and anxiety.

This section examines Jonas's thought and its debt to, and break with, Heidegger's placement of humans as aliens in an indifferent or hostile cosmos. It continues with an examination of the implications of Jonas's thought for an Ecocriticism that considers nature not as a viable refuge from culture, but as implicated in culture. In short, nature is not text, and text

is not Nature, but separating them from each other is impossible—and not desirable in any analysis of the encounter between nature and text.<sup>29</sup>

Jonas shares with many Deep Ecologists a concern for the practice of contemporary science—science especially since the adoption of the scientific method set out by Bacon and refined by others over the centuries. Like many of the Deep Ecologists, Jonas also locates the shift in modern perceptions of Nature during the Renaissance—in particular the works of René Descartes. According to Jonas, the Renaissance saw a shift in the perception of matter from one in which life was the standard to one in which all matter was viewed as lifeless (*Phenomenon* 9). Rather than the Nature of Plato's *Timaeus*, in which the world is intelligent and has a soul, scientists and philosophers adopted a view of “a nature not only intelligible without being intelligent, but also moving without being alive” (72). Since the Renaissance, Jonas suggests, humans have classified awareness of any kind—sensual, emotional, rational, irrational—and being of any kind, on opposing sides of an unbridgeable divide. In this view, “Nature, created out of nothing, has no mind of her own, but mutely performs God's will by which alone she exists” (71).<sup>30</sup> Jonas contends that Descartes's thought in particular thwarts any effort toward a greater understanding of the phenomenon of life. The more one could understand the workings of the *res extensa*, the less intelligible life becomes. “Cartesian dualism created the riddle of how an act of will can move a limb, since the limb as part of the extended world can only be moved by another body's imparting its antecedent motion to it” (61). As such, the knower, plunged into a world among the objects of scrutiny, becomes that which cannot be known (72).

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<sup>29</sup> Again, this study does not employ the term *text* in the Derridean sense, but in a much narrower sense more akin to *language*.

<sup>30</sup> It is perhaps important to note here that Jonas does not advocate an idealist or constructionist view. “Materialism,” he writes, “is the real ontology of our world since the Renaissance...Only with a ‘realist’ standpoint can there be fruitful discourse anyway, whereas an idealistic one can slip through one's fingers” (20).



At the center of this concern for the awareness of the subject in the mechanical world set out by modern science is what Jonas calls “metabolism.” This principle is the process by which the living remains alive, and the existing continues to exist. Jonas explores the concept in asking the question whether God is a mathematician. This mathematician that designed the universe, he writes, must also be the designer of the amoeba: “He must be both, or he is neither” (65).<sup>31</sup> The obstacle Jonas identifies here is that of life—that which makes the amoeba different from the mere mote. Jonas considers matter as “unities of a manifold,” but he does not ascribe that unity to an appearance engendered by a perceiving subject—or even to a field of forces—but rather “in virtue of themselves, for the sake of themselves, and continually sustained by themselves” (79). Any identity as a particular unity relies on the parts that constitute that unity, and the unity disappears as the parts disperse. It is, Jonas writes “a borrowed and mediate identity” (79). The unity does not need to maintain its identity, Jonas writes: “The material particle, identifiable in its space-time position, is simply what it is, immediately identifiable with itself without need to maintain that self-identity as an act of its existence” (81). In this formulation Jonas does not carry his analysis quite far enough—for even the “particles” we identify as unities are the site of interplay between a set of other dynamic relations—singularities. The particle itself is less stable than Jonas even contends. Living entities are different, in that they must maintain their self-identity through metabolism, by which an entity “is never the same materially and yet persists as the same self, by not remaining the same matter” (80). Unlike a machine, which consists of the same elements whether it is in operation or not, the moment a living unity becomes identical with itself, it dies—and in doing so becomes intelligible to science: “[I]t returns from its puzzling

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, the simple answer to Jonas here would be “He is neither.” However, Jonas is not referring to God as an entity but as the sum of processes that have led to the set of matter-energy relations that holds today.

and unorthodox behavior of aliveness to the unambiguous, ‘familiar’ state of a body within the world of bodies, whose general laws provide the canon of all comprehensibility” (12). Jonas proposes, building on Aristotle’s concept of *physis*, that rather than construing a living unity as a site of matter relations, matter in succession is better understood as “phases of transit for the self-continuation of the form” (80). In this sense, Jonas returns the conception of nature to an Aristotelian *telos*, although of quite a different sort. For Jonas, life, as that which sustains itself through constant replacement and succession of matter, is the key to understanding Nature, and in modern scientific formulation, it is exceedingly difficult to explain: “[A]n identity which from moment to moment reasserts itself, achieves itself, and defies the equalizing forces of physical sameness all around, is truly pitted against the rest of things” (83).

While he does not emphasize the concept of life as his student does, the division between the human and the natural is central to Heidegger’s thought. Without human *Dasein*, or “being there,” there is no basis for anything to exist—Nature included. Things “are;” only humans “exist.” In this sense, *Dasein* is the key to the disclosure or self-presencing of other things in *physis*: “Only so long as *Dasein* is, is there being” (240).<sup>32</sup> The key to this disclosure is language, and in particular poetry, which is a form of *poesis*, or making, that allows things to disclose themselves—which “lets them be.” As Heidegger writes in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up” (172). In allowing the unsayable to say itself, language allows humans to “dwell in the fourfold” of men and gods, earth and sky. The operation of science and technology, in contrast, forces the disclosure of things in *physis*. It disrupts what Heidegger calls in his essay on

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<sup>32</sup> Being, in this sense, is made possible through *poiesis*, language, poetry. Poetry lets things be.

“Language”: “The unitary fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities, which is stayed in the thinging of things, we call—the world” (197). Though science and technology seem to exercise mastery over Nature, Heidegger argues in “The Thing” that mastery is “a twofold delusion”:

first, the notion that science is superior to all other experience in reaching the real in its reality, and second, the illusion that, notwithstanding the scientific investigation of reality, things could still be things, which would presuppose that they had once been in full possession of their thinghood. (168)

Heidegger’s example of the dam on the Rhine shows how technology reduces things to standing reserve, ready to be applied for a particular use that is not its own: “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve (*Bestand*)” (322). However, in reducing such manifestations of being to standing reserve, humans do the same thing to themselves, becoming “human resources.” As humanity dominates Nature, it also dominates itself. However, this is not to say that humans and Nature are to be identified with one another. Humans are plunged into Nature in Heidegger’s concepts, but they are not of it in the same sense that a mountain or a stag is.

Heidegger, as Michael Zimmerman observes, “was never a ‘biocentrist,’ but rather a Gnostic, who viewed humans as aliens adrift in an indifferent or even hostile cosmos” (118). According to Jonas this Gnosticism, a vision of humanity as radically unsuited for its place in the cosmos, is a path to dangerous anguish and despair. In “Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Change,” Jonas criticizes Heidegger for locating humanity’s capacity for thought not in Nature, but in spite of it (214). Despite their itinerancy in Nature, their alien status, humans are unable to find value, and instead must construct it. “Under this pitiless sky,” Jonas writes, “man becomes conscious of his utter forlornness” (220). According to Jonas, if values are simply posited by will, then the entire goal of human life becomes death—to become part of undifferentiated

matter. “That nature does not care, one way or the other, is the true abyss” (233). More important, Jonas argues, is what he calls Heidegger’s “deeper insight”: that faced with death, humans care about how they exist as well as whether they exist: “[t]he mere fact of there being such a supreme care, anywhere in the world, must also qualify the totality which harbors that fact, and even more so if ‘it’ alone was the productive cause of that fact, by letting its subject physically arise in its midst” (234). Such ontology, Jonas writes, may allow for locating obligation in Being, rather than in humanity alone (283). This is the basis for Jonas’s “imperative of responsibility.”

In formulating his philosophy of Nature, Jonas attempts to find a link between what he calls “scientifically ascertainable ‘is’ and morally binding ‘ought’” (x). This effort is not entirely successful. However, Jonas effectively demonstrates how the mix of the natural and the human, language and matter, *logos* and *physis*, should give humanity pause in its efforts to engineer a home in its environment. Humans make this home, after all, by manipulating the earth, by making use of the material ready to hand—including other creatures, which also become “mere matter.” However, the ability to engineer the environment is part of what makes humans what they are. As Jonas explains it, “the raping of nature and the civilizing of man go hand and hand” (2). That is to say, since the origin of humans, human will and natural matter have been implicated in one another. As humans manipulate nature, they have also engineered themselves. However, Jonas makes a distinction between previous uses of technology, which he claims had little permanent effect on the environment,<sup>33</sup> and modern technology, which enables humanity to destroy or mar the environment—and humanity along with it. Jonas posits a responsibility for

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<sup>33</sup> Jonas again is possibly too modest in his assessment of the permanency of much prehistoric alteration of nature, in light of the effect Neolithic development continues to have on terrain in Europe, for example. Likewise, the effect of development by residents of the American continents continues to appear in areas sometimes classified as “wilderness.”

contemporary humanity to ensure the continued possibility of responsibility. “Put epigrammatically: the possibility of there being responsibility in the world, which is bound to the existence of men, is of all objects of responsibility the first” (99). This entails, he adds, a duty to preserve the environment in such a way that it enables humanity to continue in a manner “worthy of the name” (10). This worthiness also demands a respect for what Jonas describes elsewhere as the phenomenon of life. This “plenitude of life,” as Jonas describes it (136), is both independent of and affected by human will—it is both nature as found and nature as made. Artifice and Nature are distinct, but entangled beyond the human capacity to separate. To preserve humanity, and the set of natural relations that make humanity possible, Jonas advises “an imaginative ‘heuristics of fear,’ replacing the former projections of hope” (x). The stakes, he claims, are too high and our tools of prediction and discernment are too ineffective to allow for anything other than uncertainty and restraint to rule further human meddling with the not-human. “Uncertainty may be our permanent fate—*which has moral consequences*,” Jonas argues (191). That is, according to Jonas, humanity must abandon the utopian dream of abundance and adopt a program of “hope, fear, and modesty” (201).<sup>34</sup>

Rather than fear, however, Jonas’s prescriptions of uncertainty and modesty are perhaps the most valuable when considering the interaction of the textual, human and artificial with the not human, physical category of nature. Because humanity’s tools are imprecise, humans never can be sure exactly what it is they are altering—or, indeed, the effect such alteration may have. Even if the Nature/nature humans seek to preserve is in some sense “artificial,” we must approach further alteration with modesty and restraint. This is an important break with Heidegger on Jonas’s part. Though Jonas recognizes that humanity has a special role to play in shepherding

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<sup>34</sup> Jonas’s suggestion of an enlightened fascism to promote conservation is a disturbing obstacle, certainly.

Being (as well as in preserving nature—which is not the same thing), “only an ethics which is grounded in the breadth of being, not merely in the singularity or oddness of man, can have significance in the scheme of things” (284).

Jonas argues that ethics becomes part of a philosophy of nature when one acknowledges the “continuity of mind with organism and organism with nature” (282). This continuum also is key to an ecocritical approach that does not resort to the pieties or the illusory fantasies of the naïve pastoral. There should be, then, a recognition that the nonhuman is in a sense responsible for the possibility of the human—that nature (and Nature) is a requirement for the possibility of responsibility. Likewise, the continued possibility of responsibility is that which makes possible the persistence of Nature. It is what Garcilaso attempts to show in his *Égloga Tercera*: that nature makes Art possible, even as Art engenders Nature. As Jonas explains it: “[M]ost of what we now know to be inanimate is so intimately intertwined with the dynamics of life that it seems to share its nature. Earth, wind and water—begetting, teaming, nurturing, destroying—are anything but models of ‘mere matter’” (7). This is not to say that mind, organism and nature are identical, or should be identified with one another (quite the contrary). Timothy Morton is correct when he contends that monism is not the solution to the mind-matter duality. Otherness is. For all their affinity with the river, the nymphs are not one with it. Nor are they identical with the thread they weave from its gold, nor even with the tapestries they weave. They are other than all these entities, even as they are implicated in them all.

Rather, though mind and organism and nature are discrete entities, each one is entangled with the others. Part of the key to this entanglement is evident in Heidegger’s claim that “to spare and preserve means to take under our care, to look after the fourfold in its essence” (353). In Heidegger’s assessment, the essence of the fourfold (including humans) is nothingness.

However, although there is “nothing” at the base of both text and world, mind and matter, that is not to say that either of them is unreal—merely that there is no essence at their base, that there are always further illusory unities behind each illusory unity. This does not mean, however, that these unities have no attachment to the world around them, which is likewise in flux, with nothing at its core. Though it can function as an illusion of varying sophistication, ecomimesis, as Morton explains it, also becomes an authenticating device—whether it’s the “weak” version evoking an environment or the “strong” version of the situated, authenticating voice in text. This *mimesis* can refer both to text and to lived experience.<sup>35</sup> If a writer describes a horse, for example, there are many ways to know the horse. However, there are differences in the kind of knowledge afforded by reading widely about horses in science texts and in literature, examining horse DNA under a microscope, encountering one in a stable, and riding one bareback at a breakneck pace through dense woods. The code is incomplete if a reader lacks a reference: one encounters “horse” and turns to a textual encounter (through dictionary, encyclopedia, internet text, photos, video, and audio), or to a physical one, or to a mental recapitulation of either.

In this sense, the only possible reference is experience—those experiences we construct through interacting with the not-human. Books must be read, but they also must be read “out of doors”—immersed in the world that exists without reference to itself. In our adjustments to the text, we redefine Nature. In our impacts on the nonhuman world, we also redefine nature. This is not to imply that nature is a text (in the non-Derridean sense), rather: that our decisions in mind

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<sup>35</sup> I use the expression “lived experience” because the question of what humans encounter when they encounter nature is extremely troublesome. Few are the readers who perceive daily encounters with manifolds on the molecular or subatomic level, for example. Many, however, have experienced a tree. For purposes of this study, *physis* as experienced in an everyday, sensory way is the touchstone. The molecules in a leaf are colorless, but leaves as humans encounter them are green, brown and dry, scarlet and gold. We live in the space between macro-system and micro-transformations of matter and energy—and it is in that realm that our texts and our perceptions usually unfold.

and action have real, physical consequences for us as humans. That is to say that such experience may be textual as well as physical, and most often is both. The tapestries of Garcilaso's nymphs are both natural and artificial—in much the same way that his *locus amoenus* on the Tajo is able to be both imagined textually and experienced somatically. As such, a diminishment of nature damages text. As humans mar the environment, they do not destroy nature—or even “Nature.” The processes and relations hold, but the set of varied unities begins to shrink. The loss of species is a loss of the possibility of lived experience—a restructuring and diminishing of the way that particular unity can be known. Every loss of species, of site, of system, entails a corresponding impoverishing of text. The same holds true for art. To impoverish Nature is to diminish the possibilities of Art—to deprive the nymphs of their materials. And to impoverish Art is to diminish Nature—to remove the shepherds and their song from the landscape.



## Chapter Two

### Mountain Awe: Francesco Petrarch and Henry David Thoreau at the Limits of Language

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part  
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?  
Lord Byron (George Gordon)  
*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

The mountain occupies the metaphysical, spiritual—and often, the geographical—opposite pole from the pastoral, paradisiacal, garden. The pastoral, as noted in the previous chapter, frequently sets out an idealized relation between nature and humanity—an illusory relation in which human and natural *poesis* intermingle to the ease, pleasure, and delight of humanity. The illusion is that humans can escape the impurity, labor, and strife of civilization by fleeing to a natural realm that waits to embrace them. Humans inherit the pastoral as they inherit Eden—without effort, and maintaining it requires no labor. The mountain, on the other hand, demands toil. Its summit must be achieved through human will and effort. If the garden is the cultivated realm of natural beauty, the mountain is the “unhandselled” wilderness of the sublime. Civilization is born in the valley by the river, but it seeks wisdom on the mountain. To consider the mountain in its place in texts about nature is to consider wilderness as a proving ground—a place where the brave can encounter God, or achieve a clear vision of nature both altered and left alone by humanity. Dante, for example, places his Garden of Eden atop the seven-storey mountain of Purgatory—a vantage point for contemplating the state of the fallen world and a site that enables the hope of Paradise. Essential to these alpine encounters as portrayed in much western literature is the question of the sublime—the sense of exhilaration that results from an awe-inspiring encounter with natural manifolds incomprehensibly large or powerful. As

Immanuel Kant contends in his *Critique of Judgement*: without wilderness, the sublime in nature is not possible. Cultivation, beauty, and the sense that nature was made fit for humanity all destroy the possibility of the sublime encounter.

The sublime, like the pastoral, is a mode that relies heavily on both physical natural encounters and on text.<sup>36</sup> That is, confirmation for the sort of experience some people undergo in an encounter with a particular set of natural environments, derives partially from their expression in art. This is not to say that the experience did not exist before humans found the words to express it; rather, the words used to express the sublime have, in a sense, become the sublime that readers encounter in text. This chapter takes up two alpine encounters divided by centuries, by language, and by geography: Francesco Petrararch's at once literary, physical, and theological ascent of Mt. Ventoux, which he dates in a letter from April 1336; and Henry David Thoreau's moment of anxiety and thrill atop Katahdin,<sup>37</sup> New England's highest mountain, in fall of 1846. Petrarch literally consults his copy of Augustine's *Confessions* outside on Ventoux's summit, and Thoreau resorts to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Though neither peak is especially impressive in size, in each of these moments the writer has an encounter with nature that leaves him awed. For both of these men of letters, the mountain summit is the place where language fails them. The following chapter begins with a brief discussion of the connection between the wild and the Kantian sublime. It then proceeds to a discussion of Petrarch's letter describing his ascent of Ventoux. Last, it considers Thoreau's encounter with wild nature on Katahdin's peak.

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<sup>36</sup> Though Longinus, Edmund Burke, and, most recently, Jean-Francois Lyotard all have written important studies of the sublime, this work will focus primarily on the Kantian sublime, which locates the sublime not in the perceived object or manifold, but in the perceiving subject. The sublime, in short, is not in the world, but in the mind.

<sup>37</sup> I use this spelling when discussing the actual physical location—the 5,267-foot mountain in Maine's Baxter State Park. Thoreau spells it "Ktaadn" in his text. The presence of this "wilderness" in state parkland is a concern for another study.

## The Wild and the Sublime

In her essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” Iris Murdoch proposes an apt, if poetic description of the function of the sublime as Kant formulates it: “Whereas the beautiful reposes us, the sublime rends us” (263). One easily could substitute “pastoral” or “garden” for “beautiful,” and “wilderness” or “mountain” for sublime, without losing much of the meaning. Selim Kemal explains that both the beautiful and the sublime lie in the realm of reflective judgment, and are subject to a two-part analysis: the first is the apprehension of a manifold, pleasing or stunning the perceiving subject; the second requires the subject to decide whether the reaction was personal or universalizable (52). As Kant contends in the *Critique of Judgement*, the sublime does not inhere in the manifold, however, but instead in the mind that perceives it. That is, the mind both participates in ordering the perception of beauty, and takes a disinterested pleasure in the form of the manifold as it orders it. Paul Crowther explains: “[B]eauty is a function of the relation between the objective characteristics of a manifold and the cognitive faculties of the subject”(55, footnote 30).<sup>38</sup> In the case of the beautiful, the interaction between manifold and subject manifests a purposiveness without a given purpose. This is not to say that there is no perceivable end to the perception of the beautiful. Rather, the perceived end of nature is its purposiveness. It is as if nature existed to allow imagination, reason and understanding to play freely. As Deleuze suggests: “Nature’s aptitude thus appears as a power without aim, fortuitously adapted to the harmonious exercise of our faculties” (54). Such manifolds might under the proper circumstances trigger the realization that beauty exists even where there no humans are able to perceive it—inside shells that are never cast on the beach to be found, at the top of nearly inaccessible peaks, in the depths of rarely accessible gorges. The fact that there is

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<sup>38</sup> The same relation holds for the production of the sublime, as well.

beauty, waiting in potential to be perceived in this way indicates that nature is in some sense able to be understood. “The experience of natural beauty evinces an unsought but real accord of nature with human rational faculties where the free harmony of our faculties is taken to be an end for nature” (129). Our understanding, our ability to be pleased by nature, is the evidence that allows us to imagine a nature ordered by an understanding similar to ours, a nature fit for humans to inhabit, and in conformance with the human mind.

The sublime, in turn, is the converse of the beautiful. Rather than an interaction between manifold and subject that suggests that nature exists for human delight, the sublime is the result of an encounter that convinces the subject that the mind is too puny and weak to apprehend nature. As such, the trigger for the sublime is an encounter with the absolutely large or the inconceivably powerful (the “mathematical” and “dynamical” sublime, respectively). Kant explains that in the encounter with the sublime, reason demands that imagination present the intuition of the manifold, but the manifold proves too large. Imagination recoils on itself. The subject then perceives that nature is not there as end for human understanding, not cut to fit the human mind. But the subject’s reason then surges, as it is reason that has made the demand to comprehend the unfathomable. The subject experiences its weakness and insignificance, only then to experience the power and immensity of mind through reason, which conceives of the inconceivably large universe. This human capacity for reason, in Kant’s assessment, is not only commensurate with the absolutely large, but actually supersedes it. The perception of the beautiful might be stumbling upon a meadow of wildflowers, while the sublime is the attempt to fathom the immensity of Denali, or the power of the hurricane. The former suggests a natural “will” and “understanding” like our own. The latter forces a confrontation with an alien will, incommensurate with our own and indifferent to human purposes and will. As Kant writes:

“*Beautiful* is what we like when we judge it (and hence not through any sensation by means of sense in accordance with some concept of the understanding)... *Sublime* is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly” (267).

The definition of the sublime Kant sets out in his critique requires relations between several mechanisms: “The sublime can be described thus: it is an object (of nature) the *presentation of which determines the mind to think of nature’s inability to attain to a presentation of ideas*” (268). That is, in order to trigger an experience of the sublime, there must be a manifold capable of being perceived. Then there must be an effort to present the intuited manifold. Then must follow a failure on the part of the imagination, and then a realization that while the subject can present an idea through reason, nature cannot.

True sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement. Indeed, who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea? But the mind feels elevated in its own judgment of itself when it contemplates these without concern for their form and abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason that has come to be connected with it—though quite without a determinate purpose, and merely expanding it—and finds all the might of the imagination still inadequate to reason’s ideas. (256)

Although from time to time Kant refers to objects as sublime, he is using a sort of shorthand for a point he insists on more than once: in the experience of the sublime, what is truly sublime is the operation of the mind, not the manifold the subject intuits. As he defines it in terms of the mathematical sublime: “It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself. It follows that the sublime must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas” (250). The mountain is not sublime. That which the mountain enables our mind to do is sublime. Or, as Lee Rozelle explains: “The post-Kantian sublime no longer resides on Mount Blanc itself, but rather somewhere between the craggy, snow-capped peak and the mind of the observer” (4).

Kant sets out two varieties of the sublime: the mathematical and the dynamical. The mathematical sublime relates to the faculty of cognition (theoretical reason), while the dynamical sublime relates to the faculty of desire (practical reason). The former is an absolutely massive challenge to the cognitive powers, where the latter is an inconceivably powerful check on our freedom. “We call *sublime* what is *absolutely* [*schlechthin*] *large*.” By this Kant means that which is “*large beyond all comparison*” (248). The more the imagination tries to present the manifold in its unity, the larger the units it uses to make sense of it become—a sort of vertiginous ascent to ever larger unities. The dynamical sublime, on the other hand, is an encounter with massive power [*Gewalt*], not size. Again, there is a momentary recoil of the imagination when faced with such extraordinary power, followed by a realization of the subject’s own powers of mind. “When in aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is *dynamically sublime*” (260). The pleasure in the sublime stems from the subject’s perception of its own power, not in any inherent characteristic of the manifold the subject perceives. Key to that pleasure, however, is the existence of something *other than mind*—something that is able to resist the mind’s ability to represent it, or attempt to construct it. That is, the possibility of triggering or perceiving the beautiful and the sublime depends on both perception, and the actual state of the manifold with which perception interacts. As Crowther suggests: “Suppose we take pleasure in the sturdiness of an oak tree, only to find that it is rotten to the core. Would not the discovery of this fact about the ‘real existence’ of the tree totally spoil our pleasure?” (143).

The answer to this can only be a conditional yes or no. If the pleasure of the subject is interested—that is, if the subject takes pleasure in the tree as a possible set of shelves or a good place to climb, then discovering its rotten core destroys the pleasure of perceiving it. In a strict

Kantian, sense, however, the subject is to be satisfied with the form of the tree alone—not with its use for any particular purpose. On learning that the tree is rotten, however, the perception of beauty might well be tainted. Much the same relation holds for the perception of the sublime. For example, in the case of a sailor confronting a storm at sea, if the interested sailor (one, say, not at a safe distance from the storm cell) learns that the tempest is really just a light shower, he is relieved. If the disinterested sailor learns that the mammoth storm is really nothing much, surely the sublime is not possible. The fearfulness of the manifold has been lost. As Crowther writes: “If the danger is only imaginary, then perhaps we are at best playful and at worst insincere, in our appreciation of the soul’s sublimity” (113).

Though a fearless fearfulness is necessary to the experience of the sublime, the simple presence of a manifold triggering fearfulness is not sufficient in itself to provoke such an experience. The fearfulness must be of a specific kind, similar to the experience of beauty: purposeless and without interest. It must also provoke an awareness of a will not only counter to that of the subject, but utterly alien to it and incommensurate with it. If actual fear is manifested, then the sublime is not possible. For example, to contemplate and reflect upon the unmatched power of the avalanche is all but impossible when one is trying to escape being buried by it. (Although a truly sublime experience may result from contemplation of the avalanche or avalanche field once one is in a safe place.) A subject faced with a real threat—not safe from it—does not have the receptive mind necessary to appreciate the sublime. He becomes like Kant and Horace Bénédict de Saussure’s Savoyard peasant who “did not hesitate to call anyone a fool who fancies glaciated mountains” (265).<sup>39</sup> That is, though a subject may have a mind that in the

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<sup>39</sup> In his *Journal d’un voyage à Chamouni et à la cime du Mont Blanc* (1787). See also Schama (1995) for a lively discussion of the rage for alpinism among Europeans in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Saussure was one of the first men to ascend Mont Blanc, and by all accounts, he did so

proper surroundings might appreciate the sublime, the presence of real threats may render that subject's mind temporarily unreceptive. Faced with real danger, "[i]n all the evidence of nature's destructive force [*Gewalt*], and in the large scale of its might, in contrast to which his own is nonexistent, [the subject] will see only the hardship, danger and misery that would confront anyone forced to live in such a place" (265).

The confrontation with the utterly other is the basis of the sublime, and Kant locates this basis in "crude nature." Crowther notes that Kant's aesthetic sets out an "emphatic linking of the sublime with nature" (119). By the term "nature," Kant does not mean any representative of the non-human world in any given scenario. He is referring to very specific circumstances.

[I]f the aesthetic judgment in question is to be pure (unmixed with any teleological and hence rational judgment), and if we are to give an example of it that is fully appropriate for the critique of aesthetic judgment, then we must point to the sublime not in products of art (e.g. buildings, columns, etc.), where both the form and the magnitude are carried by a human purpose, nor in natural things whose very concept carries with it a determinate purpose (e.g., animals with a known determination in nature), but rather in crude nature (and even in it only insofar as it carries with it no charm, nor any emotion aroused by actual danger), that is, merely insofar as crude nature contains magnitude. (252-3)

This passage explains both why some kinds of contemplation of fearfulness without fear and why some encounters with natural manifolds do not provoke awareness of the sublime. Encountering an armed enemy in the woods from a position of safety does not spark the sublime—although the man could kill the subject and despite the fact that the subject is in a safe place. The armed man, although fearful and a danger to us, demonstrates a human will commensurate with human understanding, and is therefore unable to provoke the sublime. Likewise, an encounter with a garden or a herd of cows is incapable of sparking the sublime (unless, perhaps, something has spooked the herd and it is charging). Both are examples of

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in style: bringing along scientific gear, several bottles of wine and spirits, and a copy of Homer's *Odyssey* for reading along the way. His retinue comprised 18 people.



nature made to fit humanity's purposes. The garden is a tamed woods, the cow a domesticated animal. In these cases there is no alien will to confront, no radical otherness of wild nature. There is only nature fit to the subject's purposes.

Though the sublime is not necessarily exclusive to the natural world, generally that is where the most provocative manifolds are to be found. It is important to note that Kant does not set up a pure binary opposition of the sublime/not-sublime. There is a continuum, as the power of the sublime increases or decreases according to an array of internal and external factors.

[C]onsider bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, and the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. *Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is*, provided we are in a safe place. (261)<sup>40</sup>

As Kant notes, the sublime increases in intensity the more fearful the object of contemplation is. The more intense the encounter with the colossal or stupefyingly powerful alien will is, the more sublime the reaction of the subject's mind will be. This is not to contend, however, that the sublime is somehow posited along a purely non-binary continuum either. There is no such thing in Kant's theory as a manifold that is "a bit sublime." However, once a manifold enables the perception of the sublime in a subject, that sense of sublimity can be intensified or softened, depending on the fearfulness or intensity of encounter. That is, once a subject has become aware of the sublime, some manifolds provoke a more powerful reaction than others. Even to qualify as sublime, a manifold must be alien to human purpose. "We must not take for our examples such beautiful or sublime objects of nature as presuppose the concept of a purpose. For then the purposiveness would be either teleological, and hence not aesthetic, or else be based on mere

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<sup>40</sup> Emphasis mine.

sensations or an object (gratification or pain) and hence not merely formal” (270). In considering terrain, the preceding would seem to require the highest peaks, the deepest sea, the most remote places on earth, with little sign that humanity has put it to use. The more any manifold shows itself pliable to, or shaped by, the human will, the less useful that manifold is for provoking the sublime. This leads to a difficulty in establishing what Kant means by “nature” in reference to the sublime. He certainly is not speaking of the pastoral or bucolic: gardens, crop fields, parks or orchards. As Edward Casey writes: “a pleasant and healthy landscape lacks intensity; it lulls us into the pleasure of the beautiful. Only where landscape is sublime does tension arise...between an imagination not able to comprehend the complexity of the scene and a reason that claims to go far beyond it” (199). Of course, the boundaries between Kant’s “crude nature” (or wilderness), and nature manipulated by humanity, are blurry and porous. The wildest places on the planet frequently require the most complicated textual/legal protection.

Defining “wilderness,” then, frequently is as difficult as defining “nature.” As Roderick Nash observes: “Depending on the context...‘nature’ might be synonymous with wilderness, or it could refer to a city park” (6). Of course, the city park is unsuitable for an apprehension of the sublime. While not synonymous<sup>41</sup> with “wilderness,” Kant’s expression “crude nature” indicates that he has wilderness in mind for his site of encounters that provoke the sublime. Nash writes that ecologist Aldo Leopold defined wilderness as a tract of land that could absorb a two-week backpacking trip. Nash himself is less demanding in terms of the magnitude of the area. “In theory,” he writes, “if a person does not see, hear or smell civilization, he is in wilderness. But most people want the additional knowledge that a soft-drink dispenser is not quietly humming around the trail’s next bend. Some want it to be miles away” (4). With this definition Nash links

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<sup>41</sup> One may imagine crude nature in a non-wilderness setting, but conceiving of a wilderness without crude nature is impossible.

the concept of wilderness with perception and knowledge. It must look like wilderness, but it also must include knowledge that civilization is not 30 feet away. This is a matter of the sort of perception of environmental conditions that make the sublime possible. If a hiker enters what appears to be trackless forest only to find a vending machine, the possibility of the sublime encounter disappears.

However, finding wilderness pure enough to meet the standard of “crude nature” might be difficult if one adopts a strict definition of total purposelessness. “To insist on absolute purity could conceivably result in wilderness being only that land which the foot of man has never trod,” Nash writes (4). Nash proposes a useful and elegant solution: defining wilderness along a range, “from the purely wild on the one end to the purely civilized on the other—from the primeval to the paved” (6). In the realm of the purely civilized, nature is the outpost—the stuff of city parks and street landscaping, of hawks perching on skyscrapers. Wilderness, on the other hand, is “predominantly the environment of the non-human, the place of wild beasts... Vast, largely unmodified regions would be very close to absolute wilderness: the North American continent prior to settlement serves as an example” (7). A single footprint on a trodden but unimproved trail several miles from a road would not disqualify the area for wilderness—even if the subject spots a footprint or two more in the dirt on the way. It is enough, then, that humans will be subject to alien forces greater and more powerful than they are for the sublime to be possible. As Murdoch explains: “Confronted with some vast prospect, the starry sky, or the Alps, the imagination and the senses cannot properly take in what lies before them, that is they cannot satisfy the reason, which demands a complete ordered picture. Yet in being so defeated the reason gains a fresh sense of its own independence and dignity” (263). In this sense, even a mountain that people have summited many times can remain a wilderness—a place where

purposes incommensurate with human ones hold sway. Simple human presence does not necessarily destroy the possibility of the sublime. On the contrary, the sublime requires human presence. In his account describing the ascent of Mt. Ventoux, Petrarch encounters such an environment. The possibility of the Sublime, as a textual construction, was perhaps not available to him in the way that Kant describes it. However, Morris Bishop suggests, Petrarch's account "expresses for the first time that mountain-awe which has become a commonplace of human feeling, as of literature. This is one of the new pleasures, like speed, that civilization has discovered" (112). Not only in his encounter with the physical mountain, but in his interaction with text on Ventoux's peak, Petrarch discovers the same sense of power and magnitude that stuns him into silence and forces him to turn from human to other-than-human concerns, and ultimately to their implication in each other.

### **The Word on the Mountain: Petrarch and Augustine on Ventoux**

The climax of Petrarch's ascent of Mt. Ventoux concerns an act of reading out of doors—a moment so perfect it immediately becomes suspect. Having reached the peak after hours of struggle, yet failed to see all of the land he had hoped to see, Petrarch turns to the copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions* ("a handy little work, very small but of infinite sweetness")<sup>42</sup> he always carries. Consulting the volume as an oracle, Petrarch turns to a page at random:

May God be my witness, and my very brother, that my eyes happened to light where it was written: "And they go to admire the summits of mountains and the vast billows of the sea and the broadest rivers and the expanses of the oceans and the revolutions of the stars and they overlook themselves. (178)

Understandably skeptical, Robert M. Durling remarks, "The spine of his book must have been cracked, or he had a bookmark in book 10" (36). This passage has provoked groans of despair

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<sup>42</sup> *perexigui voluminis sed infinitae dulcedinis* (The translation is from Aldo Bernardo's edition, 178. All further translations come from this work unless otherwise noted.)

from many of the ecologically-minded critics who have considered it. “What a poignant example of glorification of mankind to the detriment of something else!” writes Arne Naess. “Petrarch cuts off his previous identifications and reifies the distinction inner-outer, alienating himself from the mountain” (190). However, Naess, an accomplished mountaineer as well as a philosopher, may not have placed this reaction of Petrarch’s in the proper context. Petrarch did not begin in the realm of the physical, of awareness of his connection to nature, only to turn away from it under the pernicious influence of Augustine. Rather, Petrarch begins his encounter with the mountain already steeped in text—particularly classical literature. That is, for Petrarch, the encounter with the world is always and at the same time suffused by the encounter with the text. Opening the *Confessions* on Ventoux’s peak is no betrayal of the world but is instead a dual climax in text and physical experience of nature. The encounter leaves him stunned.

The traditional reading of this passage revisits a debate at least as old as the works of Plato and the Pre-Socratic philosophers: the strict separation of mind and world, between ethics or history and science or matter. Scholars who approach the text in this way locate Petrarch’s failure in his sudden realization that Ventoux is just a mountain, that it cannot save his soul, and that nothing is as grand as mind:

librum clausi, iratus mihimet quod nunc etiam terrestria mirarer, qui iampridem ab ipsis gentium philosophis discere debuisssem nihil praeter animum esse mirabile, cui magno nihil est magnum. (I closed the book enraged with myself because I was even then admiring earthly things after having been long taught by pagan philosophers that that I ought to consider nothing wonderful except the human mind compared to whose greatness nothing is great). (178)

The passage seems to describe a Platonic reading: the mind distracted from contemplation of the divine to contemplation of matter. As Carol Quillen explains it: “Human beings, by directing their attention outward, lose sight of their inner selves and their purpose. In other words, Petrarch here suggests that another object of knowledge—ourselves in relation to our end, our

happiness—is much worthier of study than the external world of nature” (“Tradition,” 196). However, it is possible to consider Petrarch’s encounter with this text in another way—one that takes into account the both the context of Petrarch’s selection and the environment in which he reads it. Petrarch’s failure may not lie in allowing himself to be distracted by the natural world, as some have observed. Rather, Petrarch’s failure lies in overlooking the presence of *logos* in *physis* (or, in this case, in *Natura*): that the two realms are entangled in one another. In consulting an oracle at all, Petrarch concedes the possibility of text and world aligning (as in this case they do, perfectly). However, after reading this excerpt, Petrarch realizes that he has failed to read both Augustine and the natural scene in context with each other. He has read literally, and not “in the spirit.”

*Mons Ventosus*, as the name is in Latin, or, in more colloquial English “Windy Mountain,” barely qualifies as a mountain when compared with its brethren in the Alps or the Rockies. It stands a bit over 6,200 feet above sea level, and by setting out from Malaucène, Petrarch and his brother Gherardo gave themselves a starting jump of about 675 feet. “The ascent would hardly even be considered mountaineering today,” notes Bishop. “However, the upper levels are barren and craggy, with a high ridge falling away in cliffs; and in Petrarch’s time it was trackless” (107). Allen Weiss is a bit more impressed, noting that it is the highest point in Provence, and that the wind blasts its summit, the Col des Tempêtes.<sup>43</sup> “It has been described in terms of the greatest austerity,” he writes, “and has been compared to a “pile of rocks broken for road repair” (32). A road now follows the brothers’ route—and a stage of the Tour de France (challenging, but by no means its most difficult) now winds its way up the mountain. Petrarch dates his letter describing the ascent April 26, 1336—about three years after he departed

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<sup>43</sup> Weiss notes that in 1967 the gusts reached 320 kilometers per hour, then a world record.

Avignon (a city he loathed), and five years to the day before he was to be crowned with laurel at Rome.<sup>44</sup> He was, in short, well on his way to becoming the time's preeminent man of letters, and, as Giuseppe Mazzotta describes him, "the initiator of Renaissance humanism" (33).<sup>45</sup> He explains to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro,<sup>46</sup> to whom the letter is addressed, that he had entertained the idea of climbing the Ventoux since he was a child, growing up in its shadow. Petrarch claims that he undertook the climb "led solely by a desire to view the great height of it" (172). However, it is not only the mountain's physical presence that proves a spur to Petrarch's adventure; it is also literature. He informs Da Borgo that he had been reading Livy's account of Philip of Macedon, who climbed Mount Hemo in Thessaly,<sup>47</sup> in an effort to see the Black and the Adriatic seas from the same vantage point. It seemed, he explains, "excusable for an ordinary young man to do something considered appropriate for an old king" (172). Petrarch's climb itself, then, begins in a conjunction of impulse engendered both by nature, in the presence of Ventoux, and by literature, in the account from Livy.<sup>48</sup>

Described in short, Petrarch's journey up Ventoux fits a very familiar template. He begins with a comic discussion with himself about which companion to take (one is too talkative,

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<sup>44</sup> As Petrarch arranged them, the next letter in the *Rerum Familiarum*, IV, 2, refers to just this event. Many scholars have considered this rather suspicious, and this chapter addresses the concern briefly hereafter.

<sup>45</sup> In expressing this "standard view," Mazzotta is quoting Paul O. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1964, p.5. He also cites: Francesco Fiorentino's *La filosofia di Francesco Petrarca* (Naples: D. Morano, 1875), Giovanni Gentile's *Studi sul Rinascimento*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Florence: Sansoni, 1936); Ernst Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi, New York: Harper and Row, 1963; among others.

<sup>46</sup> Aldo Bernardo identifies Da Borgo as a theology professor of "extraordinary learning" at the University of Paris. Bishop (1966) suggests he may have been Petrarch's confessor at one time (in addition to the confession he makes in this letter). See also Durling (1974), Kirkham (2009), and Martinelli (1977)

<sup>47</sup> i.e. Mt. Balkan in Bulgaria (Bishop).

<sup>48</sup> It also is a near-certainty Petrarch had in mind Dante's *Purgatorio* when he wrote his account.

another too serious; one too weak, another far too athletic, and so forth), before settling on his younger brother. Gherardo bounds up the mountain by the steepest, most direct routes, while Petrarch lazily seeks an easier one, managing only to tire himself out in the process. The mountain is steep, but with a combination of physical effort and spiritual inspiration, he achieves the peak. He has a moment of wonder and as the sun begins to set he returns to his home below. For many critics, the story is simply too neat to be a perfectly accurate account—not necessarily because the supposed progression of events is implausible, but because of the textual, intertextual, and extra-textual circumstances surrounding the account. Quoting Pierre Courcelle's *Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire. Antécédents et postérité* (1967), Durling suggests that “one is right therefore to ask if Petrarch gives us the facts like a historian, with perfect veracity” (36). Several scholars<sup>49</sup> have pointed out the debt Petrarch's letter owes to Ovid's work, to Book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions* (though he quotes Book X), and to his own *Secretum*, notes Durling (36). The date is the tenth anniversary of his departure from Bologna, where he pursued his studies as a young man, and he envisions another decade of spiritual labor in his reverie on the peak. Mazzotta notes that the idea to assemble the letters into volumes in the first place only occurred to Petrarch in 1345, after happening upon a collection of Cicero's correspondence, and: “it was meant to be taken mainly as a book of instruction for living” (309) rather than as a precise personal record. Victoria Kirkham refers to the “fictional dating” of the letter, and suggests that “it translates a three-day alpine experience into moral allegory” (13). More likely, she suggests, the letter was written after 1342, when Gherardo had

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<sup>49</sup> Durling mentions in particular Pierre Courcelle [see *Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire. Antécédents et postérité* (1967)], Francisco Rico [see *El sueño del humanismo. De Petrarca a Erasmo*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1993. and *Vida u obra del Petrarca, I. Lectura del Secretum*. Studi sul Petrarca, 4. Padua: Antenore, 1974], and Giuseppe Billanovich, “Petrarca e il Ventoso,” *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 9 (1966): 389-401.



entered a Carthusian monastery and Dionigi, the supposed recipient of the letter, already had died.<sup>50</sup> “Is the climb allegorical?” asks Durling. “Is it possible for it not to be allegorical? If it is allegorical, what is the relation between the *real* climb and its allegorical significance?” (30).

Durling’s questions are important because in a sense they ask more about contemporary and modern habits of reading than they do about any independent quality of Petrarch’s text. To attempt to respond to these questions, perhaps it makes sense to begin with the world of matter and history—to assume that the events of the mountain occurred as Petrarch describes them. The metaphysical content of these, if any, may follow. The first important encounter for the brothers is with an elderly shepherd, who warns the men away from their effort: “fifty years earlier, driven by a like youthful motivation, he had climbed to the very top and had brought back from there nothing but repentance, weariness, and his body and clothing torn by stones and bushes” (173). Even in writing his letter, Petrarch recognizes that the warning from the wise old man of the earth is a stock plot development: “we, like all young people who refuse to heed warnings, felt our desire increase as a result of the prohibition.” This encounter serves several functions. First, it indicates that while Petrarch may have been the first humanist to attempt the climb for purely aesthetic purposes, he was by no means the first person to do so. At least one chastened shepherd got there first.<sup>51</sup> Second, the injunction is a less earthy echo of the same phenomenon

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<sup>50</sup> Kirkham (and Bortolo Martinelli, among others) notes that Giuseppe Billanovich “compellingly argued the fictitious date of the letter” in “Petrarca e il Ventoso,” *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 9 (1966): 389-401. Kirkham also mentions Durling’s “The Ascent of Mt. Ventoux and the Crisis of Allegory” in *Italian Quarterly* 18, no. 69 (Summer, 1974): 7-28; Martinelli’s *Petrarca e il Ventoso*, and Carolyn Chiappelli, “The Motif of Confession in Petrarch’s ‘Mt. Ventoux’” in *Modern Language Notes*, 93, No. 1 (Jan. 1978): 131-36. Martinelli follows Billanovich: “In particolare, il Billanovich ha cercato di fissare, con il rigore filologico che lo contraddistingue, un tempo più congruo di composizione della lettera e ne ha indicato la data intorno al 1352-53” (150).

<sup>51</sup> Bishop: “There is no clear record that anyone ever climbed a mountain for pleasure or mere curiosity from the time of King Philip of Macedon to that of Petrarch. True, there is the case of

the Wife of Bath observes in the *Canterbury Tales*: *forbede us thyng, and that desiren we*. It is the prohibition of desire, the voice of age, masculinity, and authority warning youth away from delight. It is the prohibition of Eden—the urging to accept *auctoritas* in place of *experientia*.<sup>52</sup> The biblical overtones of the injunction clearly are no accident, as Petrarch and his brother refuse to turn aside from their worldly journey. It is an ascent at once in nature and in text. Petrarch undergoes the risk of being seduced by the physical world in exchange for the possibility of passing, through analogy, from the physical to the spiritual.

The ascent, however, is different for each of the brothers, and the difference seems to indicate an attempt to convey meaning beyond a simple description of the terrain of Ventoux. According to Petrarch, Gherardo bounds up the steepest slopes like a mountain goat while he, on the other hand, “pursued a more modestly inclined mountain path” (174). Again, the effect is comic, as the lazy Petrarch does his best to find the easiest route of ascent, only to find himself covering more distance while never gaining any altitude. “The road got longer and my burden grew heavy. Meanwhile, exhausted with weariness and troubled by the confused straying I was determined to seek the heights” (174).<sup>53</sup> The mountain, it seems, refuses to acquiesce to Petrarch’s desire to find an easy route to the summit. His own desire for ease thwarts his progress, when coupled with the very real demands of the mountain. “[T]he nature of things does

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King Peter of Aragon in the thirteenth century, who is said to have climbed Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees only to see what was on the summit. There he found a lake with a monstrous hovering dragon, darkening the face of heaven with his breath. I think we may rule this out” (104). Bishop also rules out the efforts of alpine ascetics, hunters and shepherds—and even that of Empedocles (who climbed Aetna in order to throw himself in), because they had reasons for climbing other than “pleasure or mere curiosity.”

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of this trope in western literature, see Roger Shattuck’s *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Durling: “the difference between [Petrarch and Gherardo’s] paths has long been taken to refer to Gherardo’s conversion to Carthusian monasticism in 1343, and thus as evidence that the letter could not have been written at its ostensible date, 1336” (41).

not depend on human wishes, and it is impossible for a body to arrive at a summit by descending” (174). Exhausted, Petrarch rests in one of the cirques below the peak, and embarks on his first mental/spiritual reverie of self-reproach. What he cannot do physically he does mentally, jumping “from the physical to the metaphysical in mental flights.” It is a movement, Martinelli notes, that will take him “from the external to the internal, from nature to the soul, from the earth to the heavens, from the present to the past to the future” (152).<sup>54</sup>

What you have experienced so often today in trying to climb this mountain you should know happens to you and to many others as they approach the blessed life. This is not too easily realized by men, however, because although the movements of the body are visible, the movements of the mind are invisible and concealed. The life we call blessed is certainly located on high, and, as it is said, a very narrow road leads to it. Many hills also intervene and one must proceed from virtue to virtue with very deliberate steps...What detains you? Certainly nothing except the more level and, as it looks at first confrontation, less impeded road of earthly and base pleasures. Nevertheless, after you have wandered widely, you must ascend to the summit of that blessed life burdened by labor ill-deferred or you will sink slowly into the pitfalls of your sins. (175)

The identification of the physical ascent with the moral one, observes Durling, “is only apparently facile” (31). The two climbs are radically different pursuits that really have little to do with each other: “reaching the top of Ventoux may not be taken to signify an advance in virtue” (31). Petrarch confirms this by wishing they could be combined: “How I wish I could complete with my mind that journey for which I sigh day and night as I overcame all the difficulties of today’s journey with my physical body!” (175). However, rather than the ascent providing the impetus for spiritual progress, the converse occurs: Petrarch’s spiritual meditations bring “new strength to my mind and my body and made me willing to face whatever remained” (175). The spiritual and textual is placed at the service of the material and physical. Or, as Durling explains it: “the practical significance of the spiritual reflections (and this is the whole apparatus of

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<sup>54</sup> *dall'esterno all'interno, dalla natura all'anima, dalla terra al cielo, dal presente al passato al futuro* (translation mine).

religious allegory, including heaven, hell, and the fear of death) is that it helps the body climb” (32).

Not long after his moment of divine encouragement, Petrarch achieves the summit of Ventoux, and achieves what Weiss terms a “nearly ecstatic vision” (29). Petrarch describes his encounter in language appropriate to “mountain awe”:

[M]oved by a certain unaccustomed quality of the air and by the unrestricted spectacle, I stood there as in a trance. I looked back. Clouds were beneath me. And suddenly what I had heard and read about Athos and Olympus became less incredible to me when I looked out from this mountain of lesser fame. (176)

That is, in looking toward the local countryside, and past it to Italy and the Alps, Petrarch is able to understand a portion of the magnitude of the two of the holiest peaks in classical literature. His climb has taken him “above the clouds” to the realm of the Olympians, and he is able to overcome his skepticism regarding what he had read of them. On completing his ascent, in this matter, *experientia* trumps *auctoritas*. Atop the summit, Petrarch achieves a vision not only of the surrounding landscape, but of his spiritual condition set out in time. He sees how he has changed in the decade since he departed Bologna and notes, “how extensive and how many changes within me during this interim!” (176). In contemplating his present and his past, he turns for the first time in the letter specifically to the words of the *Confessions*. In this case, however, he is quoting, not consulting the work as an oracle:

The time will perhaps come when I shall enumerate all of these storms that beset my life in their appropriate order, prefacing it with those words of your Augustine: “I wish to recall all my past foulness and the carnal corruption of my soul not because I love them but so that I might love you, my God.” (176)<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Quillen here notes that in her work, “The Figure of the Reader in Petrarch’s *Secretum*” (*PMLA* 100 (1985): 154-66), Victoria Kahn argues “that Petrarch’s ‘tempus forsan veniet’ recalls Aeneas’ address to his men in the first book of the *Aeneid*, which contains the famous ‘forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit’...Kahn’s insights further reveal the futility of reading this letter simply as an imitation of Augustine” (139 n. 120). See also Quillen’s *Rereading the Renaissance*.

Here, then, is Petrarch's first explicit comparison of his spiritual journey with that of Augustine. In particular, he sees in his life the necessity for and possibility of conversion—a turning away from a sinful past. The physical clarity and breadth of Petrarch's vision on the mountain converts to a vision of his spiritual life through time. In the clear light atop Ventoux, Petrarch sees himself small, contemptible. He finds his language impaired. He cannot hide behind falsehood, but he finds it difficult to speak the truth (Durling, 33):

As for me, there still remains much that is uncertain and troublesome. What I used to love I no longer love. I am wrong, I do love it but too little. There, I am wrong again. I love it, but I am too ashamed of it and too sad over it. Now indeed I have said it right. For that is the way it is; I love, but something I would like not to love, and would like to hate. Nevertheless I love, but unwillingly, constrainedly, sorrowfully and mournfully. (176)

Again, after briefly considering what he considers a dissolute past, Petrarch projects his spiritual progress ten years into the future in the hope of improvement. Overwhelmed by the clarity of his vision on the summit, Petrarch describes an onrush of emotion that, while never using the term, very nicely breaks down the stages of the Kantian sublime: “I was rejoicing in whatever progress I had enjoyed, I was weeping for my imperfections and I was bewailing the general mutability of human actions” (177). That is, Petrarch recognizes his impermanence, regrets his weakness, and rejoices in his progress. So powerfully do these emotions overtake him, that Petrarch forgets where he is, and why he came there. Coming slowly to himself, and noticing that the sun has begun to set, Petrarch turns one more time to the landscape—taking in Lyon and the sea at Marseilles and the Rhône. Then, before he begins his descent, it occurs to him to consult his copy of Augustine's *Confessions*.

Petrarch's act of “reading out of doors,” of consulting a textual oracle for guidelines on reading the world of experience, is only the most recent in a long line of similar episodes. It is, moreover, a tradition with which Petrarch is familiar. This sequence begins with Virgil's

*Eclogue IV*, in particular lines 4-7, which some subsequent Christian readers interpreted as foretelling the birth of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;  
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo:  
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;  
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.

The last age of the song of Cumae arrives,  
The great sequence of ages to be born again.  
The virgin returns, and the reign of Saturn returns;  
a new child descends from high heaven. (IV, 4-7)<sup>57</sup>

In *City of God*, Augustine contends that Virgil's lines were "derived from the Sibyl of Cumae" (X, 27). This Sibyl appears in the *Aeneid* as Deiphobe, whom Aeneas consults on his way to the underworld.<sup>58</sup> Virgil describes the priestess as inscribing her poetic prophecies on leaves, which the wind through her door then scatters (*Aeneid* III, 520-529, VI. 40-116). Augustine contends that Virgil writes of the birth of Christianity "with complete truth" even though he was not aware of what he was doing. In this respect the function of Virgil as poet, and the role of the Sibyl whose lines he conveys, are similar—neither intends to tell the specific truth that each conveys. For Augustine, however, the possibility of this disjunction is not an impediment to interpretation: "For through him [Moses] the one God has adapted the sacred writings to many men's interpretations, wherein will be seen things true and also diverse" (*Conf.* XII 31, 42). However, as Quillen notes, this shifts the burden of establishing meaning primarily to the readers of a text. "Such a perspective on reading places an overwhelming emphasis on the condition of the reader, who will be able to understand if and only if she approaches the text with the internal ear of the spirit open to the voice of God" (51). Each reader who achieves this spiritual openness with

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<sup>56</sup> A reason, several scholars have noted, that Dante elected Virgil to be his guide through the *Inferno* and in ascending the mountain in the *Purgatorio*.

<sup>57</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>58</sup> See Quillen, McCormack, and Swerdlow.

respect to the text, Quillen writes, “will find there the meaning that God intends” (51). Petrarch adopts this interpretive openness from Augustine, Quillen writes: “[A]ny true meaning that we derive from a book is not to be rejected, even if it never occurred to the original author” (96-7).<sup>59</sup> A text opens differently to different readers, depending on what the individual reader is capable of divining from it. This same openness—and responsibility on the reader’s part—extends to the encounter with nature. The is, the reader must approach the terrain “spiritualiter” as well as the text.

Petrarch’s account of his Ventoux climb is far from the only one of his works to engage with Augustine’s writing. Robert Pogue Harrison observes that Petrarch’s *Secretum confliu curarum mearum* (the *Secretum*) “deals with his moral failure to follow the conversional itinerary of his mentor St. Augustine, with whom he is in dialogue in the work” (107). This textual echo is important for readings of this letter, because many of the studies focusing on it note that its structure closely mirrors Book VIII of the *Confessions*—the chapter in which Augustine turns from his life of hedonism and converts to Christianity. Victoria Kirkham observes that at least one passage placed in the mouth of the Augustine of the *Secretum* echoes the selection from Book X of the *Confessions*, which Petrarch happens to consult on Ventoux:

What good has all your reading done you? ... What does it matter if you have learned about the orbits of the planets, if you know the expanse of the oceans and the course of the stars, about the properties of plants and rocks and the secrets of nature? What difference does all of this make if you do not know yourself? (14)<sup>60</sup>

Quillen notes that interpretations of Petrarch’s use of Augustine must contend carefully with the “situatedness” of readings of Augustine’s work. That is, “[i]n the fourteenth century, for

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<sup>59</sup> Quillen is paraphrasing a section of Petrarch’s *Rerum senilium libri* (IV, 4, 868).

<sup>60</sup> *Lectio autem ista quid profuit? ... Quanquam vel multa nosse quid relevant si, cum celi terreque ambitum, si cum maris spatium et astrorum cursus herbarumque virtutes ac lapidum et natura secreta didiceritis, vobis esti incogniti?* (English translation from *The Secret by Francesco Petrarch with Related Documents*. Ed. Carol E. Quillen, Boston: Bedford/ St. Martins, 2003.)

example, Augustine was used to support free will and to reject it, to claim a relationship between merit and grace and to deny it, to defend literary study and to condemn such pursuits as utterly worthless in the context of a Christian life” (20). Most important for Petrarch’s relationship to Augustine’s work is the interpretive element in conversion. As Quillen explains, in order to become for Augustine to become Catholic, he had to change his reading habits. He “had to learn to read the Old Testament not ‘ad litteram’ but ‘spiritualiter’” (46).<sup>61</sup> Language was no perfect tool for Augustine, Quillen contends. He assumed “a gap...between words and things” that made total understanding impossible through words, whether spoken or written. Also, Augustine accepts that he cannot attain direct knowledge of anything (49). However, in Book VIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine relates the results of interpreting language “spiritualiter.” In that book, Augustine hears the tale of two men who converted to Catholicism after hearing of the conversion of St. Anthony. The story becomes a vertiginous tale of basing conversion on text: St. Anthony converts after hearing a portion of the Gospel recited, and assuming the verse applies to him. The two “Agentes” in Augustine’s story convert after hearing the story of Anthony. Then, Augustine hears their tale and, in a famous scene (*Tolle! Lege!*) consults the Bible as oracle, landing on *Romans* 13:13, in which Paul exhorts his audience to abandon drunkenness and dissolution, and turn to God.<sup>62</sup> “When Augustine accepts *Romans* 13:13 as *applying directly to him*,” Durling writes, “he eliminates the gap he has been experiencing between word and event: he accepts identity with the referent of the text, and so the split within himself is healed. He begins immediately reading himself in the spirit instead of in the letter” (39). Augustine then

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<sup>61</sup> *Conf.* V 14, 24.

<sup>62</sup> “let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy.” (Verse 14 continues: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.”) *The Catholic Study Bible (New American Bible)*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990.



converts. According to Durling, however, the chain of text and conversion does not end there. It leads to Ventoux and to Petrarch, who reads a passage by Augustine calling on him to turn away from his worldly life and follow God.<sup>63</sup> Here the chain tangles.

If Petrarch's letter about Ventoux is to be about conversion, it must be conversion of a rather strange kind. Rather than consulting a Life of the Saint, or hearing the Gospel, and then assuming the tale was intended specifically for him, Petrarch's oracular text comes from a doctor of the church. It is, as noted earlier, perfect:

And they go to admire the summits of mountains and the vast billows of the sea and the broadest rivers and the expanses of the oceans and the revolutions of the stars and they overlook themselves. (178)

After wondering "how can the oracle be taken seriously?" (35), Durling makes an important observation on the place of the passage in the text of the letter: it is the conjunction of environment and text. "The description of the landscape is part of the appositeness of the oracle, which mentions precisely the items Petrarch has been looking at...The oath *calls attention* to the possibility that this is fiction...the seriousness lies precisely in the necessity of questioning the event" (36). The oath also highlights the manner in which text is already present in the landscape Petrarch surveys. His oracle refers to the very environment in which he reads it—like standing on a spot on an enormous, full-scale map that reads "you are here." However, as Quillen reminds Petrarch's readers, when Petrarch deploys the *Confessions*—even in his own epistolary confession—it is often to draw attention "to the differences, the disjunctions, between his life

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<sup>63</sup> "The more often basic patterns are imitated, the more diluted the imitations become. Anthony's oracle was the Gospel. / Augustine's oracle was the Apostle. / Petrarch's is a patristic writer. Anthony *heard* the text being read aloud. / Augustine was directed by a voice to *read*. / Petrarch, by text or habit, *read*. / Anthony sold his possessions and became an anchorite. / Augustine was baptized and took up a monastic life. / Petrarch—turned his inward eye on himself" (41). See also John Freccero. "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics." *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 34-40.

and Augustine's" (135). Quillen, following Durling, interprets the moment as an exercise in irony, a critique of the allegorical tradition Petrarch so painstakingly assembles. In this view, the oracular passage from the *Confessions* blasts Petrarch's attempt to connect the world to the divine, the inner to the outer, the self to the world. In considering his oracle, "He has to change his whole approach and condemn the impulse that led him to climb the mountain in the first place, for this is the implication of Augustine's words" (142).

Petrarch does employ Augustine to undercut the possibility of mountain climbing as spiritual allegory. In the end, according to the passage Petrarch selects, the mountain is only a mountain—not only unable to contribute to his salvation, but an active obstacle to it, as it interferes with his contemplation of the spirit. However, it is also possible that the recognition that Ventoux is "only a mountain" is not a spiritual defeat. Petrarch's failure is not in action or in discipline, but in reading. As a beginning, the actual Latin from the *Confessions* is worth consulting in this regard:

Et eunt homines admirari alta montium et ingentes fluctis maris et latissimos lapsus fluminum et oceani amicum et giros siderum, et relinquunt se ipsos. (10.8.15)

Bernardo, among others, has translated the last portion of this passage as "they overlook themselves." However, this may not be the closest rendering of the passage's meaning. If the phrase "relinquunt se ipsos" is rendered "they abandon themselves" or "they release themselves," a different interpretation is possible—one more congruent with Petrarch's reaction on the summit. He does not, after all, "overlook" himself. He is very much aware of himself. Petrarch is aware, rather, that although other people have abandoned themselves, he has not. He has failed to recognize the presence of text in nature. Instead of "overlooking" the self in contemplating nature, Petrarch realizes that he must "release" or "abandon" himself in order to acknowledge the presence of mind in world. This interpretation is perhaps more in keeping with

the Augustine who recognized both the temptation of nature and its sacramental value—what Sallie McFague calls “Augustine and his love of ‘light and melody and fragrance and food and embrace’<sup>64</sup> as ways to God” (31). As Yi-Fu Tuan notes, Augustine “evinced such sensitivity to the beauties of nature and the world that they were to him a temptation.” He escaped such temptation’s clutch only by recalling that “God’s existence and glory” manifest themselves in nature (72). That is, for Augustine, all creation reflects God. *Logos* is already manifest in *physis*. A reading along these lines also may provide a better explanation of the context of the passage from the *Confessions*, in which Augustine perceives the natural scene in his memory, and describes the power of word to evoke it. Petrarch’s lapse is in his failure to read the Augustinian text in the context where he found it—not in that of his spiritual self-reproaches, or in the context of his confession—but in its entanglement with the natural environment in which he encounters it. The passage from Augustine not only matches the scene as map matches terrain, it becomes *part of the environment* in which Petrarch finds himself. Petrarch’s undercutting of allegory is a victory. His failure to see that both world and spirit are real is his failure. He has read the natural scene badly—in the letter rather than in the spirit.

This realization, perhaps, is a more apt explanation for Petrarch’s reaction to his oracle. He refuses to read any further, despite his brother’s request, and he falls silent for the evening journey back to the town:

I confess that I was astonished, and hearing my eager brother asking for more I asked him not to annoy me and I closed the book enraged with myself because I was even then admiring earthly things after having been long taught by pagan philosophers that that I ought to consider nothing wonderful except the human mind compared to whose greatness nothing is great. (178)

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<sup>64</sup> *Conf.* Bk. X, 6

The language of the sublime has returned in this passage. According to Petrarch's reading of the pagan philosophers, greatness inheres not in the world, but in the mind "compared to whose greatness nothing is great." Petrarch's anger is not directed to the earthly things in themselves, which have distracted him from his spiritual purpose, but to his mind, which has failed to read those earthly things in the spirit, rather than the letter. Weiss explains that Petrarch views Ventoux on his descent as "scarcely a cubit high in comparison with loftiness of human meditation" (179) because he was trying to reconcile "contradictory needs: love of nature and love of God" (9). Bishop contends that Petrarch, "[o]n the edge of romantic pantheistic identification with nature" instead turned inward (112). However, for Augustine, love of God and love of nature are not contradictory impulses. The mountain cannot save Petrarch's soul; God is as present there as elsewhere. The ascent does not matter; the reading of the terrain does. For Petrarch, there was never a possibility of pantheistic nature-adoration. There was only the opportunity to read in the wild mountain a path to God, and in failing to consider the oracle—the text—as he encountered it on Ventoux, Petrarch also fails to encounter *logos* in nature. Petrarch's silence on descent precedes the confession he intends to make in a letter to his Augustinian father-confessor—not that the world seduced him, but that he read it badly.

### **Thoreau on Katahdin: At the Limits of Language**

Five hundred years after Petrarch's ascent of Ventoux, another man of letters attempted to scale the peak of his local mountain. Henry David Thoreau's failed attempt to climb Katahdin,<sup>65</sup> related in the posthumous collection *The Maine Woods*, is in many ways as pivotal a moment in Thoreau's work as the Ventoux journey is in Petrarch's. Thoreau frequently alludes to humanity's need for wildness. As Nash puts it: "For Thoreau wilderness was a reservoir of

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<sup>65</sup> At 5,267 feet, Katahdin is the highest mountain in Maine, but not east of the Mississippi. Mt. Mitchell in North Carolina is more than 1,500 feet taller.

wildness vitally important for keeping the spark of the wild alive in man” (88). Though throughout his work Thoreau writes of the necessity of cultivating and nurturing a “kinship” with nature, high on the slopes of Katahdin Thoreau comes into contact with a true wilderness—a nature not designed for the ease and pleasure of humanity. In this contact with something like Kant’s “crude nature,” Thoreau describes a moment of anxiety, awe and exultation, and resorts to the language of the sublime in an effort to convey what he experiences. Thoreau’s encounter with wilderness that does not claim humanity as kin occurs in the physical realm, to be sure, but the language of German Idealism and of German and English Romanticism furnish him with the textual tools to attempt to convey in language what he experiences in mind and body.

Thoreau’s education in letters was extensive and included forays into the literatures of several languages, including Greek and Latin, Italian, French, German and Spanish, according to Robert Sattelmeyer. However, he read many of the foreign works that had the most influence on him in translation—Thomas Carlyle’s translation of J.W. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, for example, which so influenced his early career (7). Thoreau’s actual library was comparatively small (according to Sattelmeyer it numbered some 400 volumes, if one excludes the 700 unsold copies of *A Week*), but it was painstakingly assembled (60). Also, he counted on access to Harvard’s library and the collections of his friends Bronson Alcott and R.W. Emerson. Sattelmeyer contends that Thoreau lacked the deep knowledge of German literature that other Transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker enjoyed, but he read more widely in classical and early English literature, American history, and natural history (xi). It is difficult to overstate the importance of German Idealism and English Romanticism (chiefly represented by Carlyle and S.T. Coleridge) to the work of the Transcendentalists. As Karl Kroeber explains, the Transcendentalists shared with the Romantics a “consciously

projective participation in the eternal ongoingness of self-transforming natural processes” (14). In turn, both the Romantics and the Transcendentalists drew a great deal of their philosophical basis from German Idealism, in particular the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, from which the Transcendentalists derived their name.<sup>66</sup> Doubtless, Emerson was influenced by these works more than Thoreau, who approached them primarily through Emerson’s writing.<sup>67</sup> In any event, Kant’s philosophy reached the Transcendentalists only through some strange filters: misreadings of the original German, misreadings of translations, and accurate readings of English writers such as Carlyle and Coleridge, who in turn had misread the German philosophers themselves.

The most important philosophical influence on the transcendentalists was Kant’s work, which Emerson knew both from the original<sup>68</sup> and from various interpretations, misinterpretations and bastardizations in other writers’ work. In grossly simplified form, Kant considered physical, material nature as a product of the ways humans experience things—through forms and categories inherent in our means of knowing anything. As Collingwood adds, succinctly: “when we ask what these things are in themselves, Kant simply replies that we do not know” (116). Emerson seizes in particular on Kant’s separation of reason from the understanding, as he explains in the following section from “The Transcendentalist”:

What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of

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<sup>66</sup> Critics assigned the group this name in mockery, and the members first struggled against it, then accepted it with resignation. See Richardson, Buell, and Van Doren.

<sup>67</sup> Further, it is worth noting that some critics (among them Mark Van Doren) held (rightly, I think) that Thoreau was influenced more by Emerson than by German Idealism, and Emerson was more of a Platonist than an Idealist in the German style (55).

<sup>68</sup> Emerson owned a copy of the 1838 translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. (81)

In Emerson's assessment, Kant's distinction between Reason and Understanding correlate approximately to the ways in which Idealists and Materialists see the world. The Reason was active, imaginative, creative, intuitive, while the Understanding, in Emerson's reading, comprehends the empirical: data. "Never mind," writes Buell, "that this was a wishful reading of Coleridge's version of the Reason-Understanding distinction, in itself a wishful reading of Kant's German successors' wishful reading of Kant" (*Endangered World* 61). Emerson told his audience that Kant, *contra* Locke, posited a set of ideas derived not from experience, but necessary for the attaining of experience in the first place: the transcendental forms. From this formulation, Emerson trips with gusto into transcendent error: the contention that through intuition one could come to know the thing in itself (as a reflection of mind or spirit). "That Kant denies Reason can know the thing in itself, whereas Emerson granted Reason that knowledge invoking Kantian authority, is one of the ironies of intellectual history" (Buell, 61). This is not to say that a sound basis in Kantian idealism was essential to the success of the Transcendentalist "program," such as it was. What Buell and Rene Wellek call Emerson's misapprehension of Kantian thought served the Transcendentalists better, perhaps, than a more conventional reading might have.

Although German Idealism formed a philosophical basis for much Transcendentalist thought (regardless of the accuracy of their interpretation), as important were the English popularizers of German thought, like Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, with whom Emerson carried on a decades-long correspondence and friendship. Emerson so admired Carlyle's work that he sponsored the publication of *Sartor Resartus* in Boston. Carlyle shares a good bit of the

blame for getting Kant wrong,<sup>69</sup> and enabling Emerson thus to misinterpret him as well. However, Carlyle's fiction also gives form to many of the textual accounts concerning an encounter with nature—an encounter extremely important to the Transcendentalists as well and the English Romantics. Teufelsdröckh's encounter with the sublime in the mountains ("A hundred and a hundred savage peaks in the last light of Day; all glowing, of gold and amethyst") leads him to a realization that must be much like what Emerson means when he speaks of direct, intuitive knowledge of spirit through nature: "a murmur of Eternity and Immensity, of Death and of Life, stole through his soul; and he felt as if Death and Life were one, as if the Earth were not dead, as if the Spirit of the Earth had its throne in that splendor, and his own spirit were therewith holding communion" (116-7).<sup>70</sup> Thoreau, too, has a moment of communion on Katahdin, but rather than a rosy glow of welcome and kinship, he finds a vast, stony, indifference to his presence and survival.

Thoreau began his trip to Katahdin in fall of 1846, and he kept extensive notes on the journey. Much of the text about his trip made it from his *Journal* to the final manuscript with few, if any, alterations—though Thoreau did extend and amplify his observations in the later text. The account as Thoreau elaborated it relies on one of his favorite techniques: immediacy of address. It is as if the narrative voice is directly speaking to the reader, as if the text exists for the two of them alone, and as if they inhabited the same physical as well as rhetorical space, although the technique is subtler and less abrupt than it is in his earlier writing on the Concord

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<sup>69</sup> In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle has Prof. Diogenes Teufelsdröckh write that man is "A Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition" in "the eye of Pure Reason." Though using Kantian terminology, it has, of course, nothing in common with Kantian epistemology. This scene occurs in the Goethean-titled chapter "The Sorrows of Teufelsdröckh."

<sup>70</sup> For the Transcendentalists, and for Thoreau in particular, Hindu texts also provided an extensive basis for writing about the interaction of mind, spirit, and nature. A section in the following chapter, concerning Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, takes up that influence on his thought at greater length.



and Merrimack.<sup>71</sup> However, rather than scribbling his observations in a frenzy on an inhospitable peak, Thoreau actually assembled the manuscript safe on flat ground during his sojourn at Walden. The site of Walden Pond, where Thoreau spent two years experimenting with a sort of pastoralism in practice, is the geological and rhetorical opposite of Katahdin. It is low ground, swampy even. Thoreau cultivates much of it as a garden as he inhabits the area. It is the place where Thoreau attempts to show that nature and humanity fit, that there is kinship between them.<sup>72</sup> At Walden, even horrific visions of death and decay work to convince Thoreau that humanity has a place in nature, an alternative to the world of town and commerce that forces people to deny that relationship. Buell, however, observes that Thoreau's claim to kinship with nature is always qualified. He may claim that the wild is necessary for the health of humans, but there are limits "Though he celebrated wildness, his was the wildness not of the moose but of the imported, cultivated escapee from the orchard" (*Imagination* 116). As Thoreau leaves Walden for Katahdin, he not only strips away much of his connection to civilization, but also sheds the embrace of the garden. Thoreau comes to understand that his affinity for and kinship with nature does not extend to every place on the globe—or even every place in New England.

This understanding strikes Thoreau when he separates from his party in an effort to summit Katahdin (the others in his party are not inclined to make the attempt with him), and then gets lost. According to his *Journal*, Thoreau actually makes two attempts on the summit, and both fail. The first he begins in the afternoon after his group has encamped below the ridge

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<sup>71</sup> Timothy Morton notes that the technique is a common one among nature writers, and calls it "ecomimesis." It is a reifying technique, he contends, that makes Nature into an object that can be regarded and made to serve a purpose. The work to read is *Ecology Without Nature* (2007). More discussion of ecomimesis ensues in the following chapter.

<sup>72</sup> For more on *Walden* as experiment in pastoral, see Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, Laurence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, James McIntosh's *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist*, Frederick Garber's *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination*, Robert Milder's *Reimagining Thoreau*, and H. Daniel Peck's *Thoreau's Morning Work*.

leading to the peak. he begins to follow a stream uphill, over downed trees and piles of rocks: “The mtn was a vast conglomerate or aggregation of loose rocks—as if sometime it had rained rocks—and they lay as they fell upon the mt. sides Nowhere fairly at rest but leaning on each other with cavities between” (339). He chooses a route “more arduous than satans in Pandemonium” (337) only to find a flock of sheep grazing, and a cloud blocking his view of the rest of the route. He returns to camp and the next morning leads his entire group up the ridge. Quickly outpacing the group again, he finds himself alone again, atop a ridge below the summit. Again, clouds stymie his progress: “It was like sitting in a chimney and waiting for the smoke to blow away. It was, in fact a cloud-factory” (83). Here, Thoreau writes in his *Journal*, “[i]t reminded of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus—Such was the Caucasus and the rock where he was bound... It was vast and titanic & such as man never inhabits” (339).<sup>73</sup> Thoreau describes the scene as “vast, Titanic” more than once in his *Journal* and in the later essay (83, 84), and he begins to have an inkling that perhaps he has ventured into a place where his kinship with nature is not the pleasant relation to which he is accustomed. “Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends,” Thoreau writes in his *Journal*. “He is more lone than one” (339).<sup>74</sup> Here he attempts to describe the alien, even hostile quality of the landscape into which he has intruded:

Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but

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<sup>73</sup> See p. 89 for Petrarch’s very similar description of the peak of Ventoux.

<sup>74</sup> This text appears in the manuscript of “Ktaadn” virtually unchanged. The first part of the quote is identical. In the second part, Thoreau substitutes the words “... you can imagine” (83) for “one.”

forever relentlessly drive the hence to where I *am* kind. Why seek me here where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear.<sup>75</sup> (84)

Bryan Moore notes that “[o]n the summit, he finds not a kindly Mother Nature or even the pleasing dread of the Sublime, but a hostile, personified ‘stepmother’” (145). In addition to the geographical error (Thoreau never makes it to the summit), this reading fails to account for the context of Thoreau’s account. Most important, Thoreau, as early as his *Journal*, and certainly as late as the final text for the essay, is deliberately comparing his attempts on the mountain to the travails of the Titans—and to one of the titans in particular: Prometheus, in his guise as Satan. When Thoreau refers to “Titanic” nature, he is referring not to scale, but to fitness: it is the nature *for the titans*.

As if to shore up his own titanic credentials, Thoreau immediately quotes from *Paradise Lost*:

Chaos and ancient Night I come no spy /  
With purpose to explore or to disturb /  
The secrets of your realm but .../  
... as my way /  
Lies through your spacious empire up to light<sup>76</sup> (84)

In these lines, Satan seeks to escape the underworld and infiltrate newly-created Eden, as vengeance against God for casting him and his legions into Hell. Thoreau draws a parallel in this case between Satan intruding on creation, Prometheus venturing to steal fire from the gods, and humans daring to set foot in places not meant for them: “The tops of mountains are among the

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<sup>75</sup> This passage from “Ktaadn,” again, is substantially the same as the text that appears in Thoreau’s *Journal*. However, some of the lines in the *Journal* entry immediately following this passage appear later in the later text, and Thoreau originally wrote: “Why seek me where I have not called you and then complain that I am not your genial mother” (340).

<sup>76</sup> The reference is to Book Two, lines 970-4. The quote is uncited in Thoreau’s essay, and does not appear in the *Journal*.

unfinished parts of the globe, whither it is a slight insult to the gods to climb and pry into their secrets and try their effect on our humanity” (84). This intrusion into the territory of the divine, this tweaking of inconceivably awesome power, is at the core of the human experience of the sublime. In the context of this climb, the words of *Paradise Lost*’s Satan become Thoreau’s own. Ralph Black contends that “As *presence*, Katahdin demands an exclusively *present* attention, negating the usefulness of the interpretive “texts” Thoreau has carried with him” (68). However, Thoreau deploys these texts to enormous effect, tying himself into a Romantic literary tradition of challenge to overwhelmingly powerful entities. Thoreau makes clear that he is no “savage” who identifies with his place in nature. “Simple races, as savages, do not climb mountains,” Thoreau writes, “their tops are sacred and mysterious tracts never visited by them. Pomola is always angry with those who climb to the summit of Ktaadn” (85). Yet it is not map nor social taboo nor divine prohibition that drives Thoreau from his attempt on the summit—it is nature in the form of clouds blocking the view of his path. The clouds could persist on the ridge for days, Thoreau knows, so he is “compelled to descend” (85). After this Promethean vision, Thoreau finds the rest of his group, of all things, eating cranberries and blueberries. He has returned to where nature “*is kind.*”<sup>77</sup>

Thoreau’s encounter with Nature that wants little to do with humanity has not ended, however. One more encounter with the sublime in wilderness remains for him, and instead of finding it on the peak of the mountain, he encounters it in a gentle meadow well below the summit. Thoreau and his party have been relying on three “texts” to orient them as they pass through much of what is now Baxter State Park in Maine (and which is now very well-mapped

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<sup>77</sup> After considering the seductions of allegory in Petrarch’s account, Thoreau’s easy transition in terrain from the utterly inhospitable to the practically nurturing aspects of nature seems too neat to be entirely accurate, but Thoreau’s *Journal* indicates that the episode occurred as he relates it in his essay.

indeed): the oral tradition knowledge of his guide, “Uncle George,” a gazetteer describing the region, and a map the group copied from a much larger copy on the wall of a local tavern. Throughout the journey, the hikers have been seeking a locale referred to on their map and in their gazetteer as “Burnt Lands,” but they have been unable to locate the blackened terrain the map and guide have led them to expect. What they find in that location instead, William Howarth observes, is “a young forest and lush under-story, thick with blueberries. Contrary to the map's static label, he sees a riot of growth in progress” (86). It is here, “a natural pasture for the moose and deer, exceedingly wild and desolate” (91), on descent from a summit he never made, in a meadow mislabeled on the map he has been consulting, that Thoreau delivers what Howarth calls with some irony his “Sermon on the Mount.” It is a summation of his contact with wild nature that Roderick Nash calls “near hysterical” (91):

This was that Earth of which we have heard, made of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific...I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one—*that* my body might,—but I fear bodies. I tremble to meet them... Talk of mysteries!—think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common* sense! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?* (92-3)

James McIntosh writes that as a narrator, Thoreau is “comparatively without rhetoric or pretension. More intent on the narrative itself, he is thus more involved in the experience of nature” (188). However, as immediate as this passage seems on first read, it is written at a greater remove from the event than much of the rest of the essay. There is no corresponding passage in Thoreau's *Journal* for this passage. It must have been composed some time afterward—most likely in the (admittedly spartan) comforts of his little shack at Walden. In a strange irony,

Thoreau's most "hysterical" writing is in many ways his most literary. Again, Thoreau alludes to Satan's journey in *Paradise Lost*, and then describes that journey in reverse: a progression from pastoral, to wilderness, to primordial. Last he turns his textual eye from external nature to the self, and then to the contact between them—the contact that in a sense constitutes the entities as they interact.

Several scholars read this passage as a "recognition of human limits" (Howarth, 85).<sup>78</sup> In *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, Robert Richardson writes that Katahdin teaches Thoreau that "while man is part of nature, he is not the lord of nature...Nature will support and nourish him, but only if he respects and acknowledges the limits" (181). Black indicates what he calls Thoreau's "rhetorical silence," and considers this passage an example of the ultimate failure of language in the face of an authentic encounter with the wild where "[t]hought, reason, and understanding vanish because they are overwhelmed by the physical: *locus* rewrites, and ultimately silences, *logos*" (69). The contact Thoreau makes, according to Black, is with "the validity of his silence in a topography that subsumes utterance" (69). These researchers are correct to point out the limits between language and world as underlying Thoreau's textual outburst. However, the literary nature of the outburst itself should provide a hint as to what really has awed Thoreau. It is not that there are limits—but that these limits are *porous*. That is, the separation between Matter and Word, World and Mind is not absolute. Their limits, the borders between them, are inextricably tangled where they are not blurred entirely. In this moment recalling the sublime in nature, Thoreau recognizes that human *logos* cannot direct *locus*. As Loren Eiseley explains: "a granitic realism forced from him the recognition that the natural world is indifferent to human morality, just as the young Darwin had similarly brooded over the

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<sup>78</sup> Also see Buell and McIntosh.

biological imperfections and savagery of the organic realm” (56). Thoreau employs the language of the sublime not to depict some anthropomorphized hostility in Nature, or even to set appropriate Natural limits to human will. Rather, Thoreau’s “sermon” reveals the sly contradictory tension present in so much of his work. At the very moment Thoreau expresses his utter alienation from indifferent Nature, *he also recognizes himself* as part of this grand, stony indifference.

The very force denying him comfort is the one of which he is made—the wild *physis* he encounters on the mountain. Thoreau comes to acknowledge not limits or separation from nature, but that he is part of the vast wilderness. Thoreau’s slyness is in showing the double bind of the explorer’s encounter with the wild: he is at once overwhelmed by the utter otherness of nature, and the stunning recognition that one is at the same time, *of* that otherness: “I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me.” As McIntosh explains it, “[t]he wilderness for Thoreau is a form of *phusis*, or nature-as-growth, but one that threatens man with its vastness and power” (189). This identity and otherness interpenetrate. The reason Thoreau is able to experience the sublime in the meadow rather than on the mountaintop is because in the infinity of his connection the surrounding universe has granted him a vision of the sublime. The “mystery” Thoreau speaks of resides not in spirit or in matter alone—but in the interaction between them. His cry of “Contact! Contact!” is not of longing or frustration. It is a YAWP of recognition.

On Katahdin Thoreau comes to recognize that world and text, while not the same, constitute each other through contact—that text and world make each other through interacting with each other. Howarth touches on this lesson tangentially when writing about what a strange mountain tale “Ktaadin” is. It is not a story of triumphantly conquering a peak, he writes, but

instead “of wandering in confusion off trail and getting lost, mostly because Thoreau is relying on a map” (85).<sup>79</sup> Thoreau, he observes, was no naïf about the nature of text and representation. He was very widely read. He made maps for a living and was aware of their status as “arbitrary constructs, imposing signs that may well be false” (88). The point, however, is not that maps always necessarily have nothing at all to do with the terrain they purport to represent. Even when the maps are wrong, professional surveyors still see the terrain through the prism they offer. Howarth observes that for Thoreau, “knowledge rises not just from maps but also trees and berries, inarticulate matter that directs how we observe or describe” (87). To experience terrain in a fully human way requires attention to both matter and text, both terrain and map.

### **The Sublime: Matter, Word and Wilderness**

In *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Marjorie Hope Nicholson describes the sublime as moving over the centuries from the kingdom of the divine to the realm of Nature. “Awe, compounded of mingled terror and exultation, once reserved for God, passed over in the seventeenth century first to an expanded cosmos, then from the macrocosm to the greatest objects in the geocosm—mountains, ocean, desert” (33).<sup>80</sup> Nicholson’s choices of terrain are apt: they are the realms of the sublime, of course, but only to the extent that they remain wilderness. A mountain with a charming chalet perched on its slopes may be delightful, but its ability to spark the sublime in the observer is severely impaired. In the case of these two accounts of mountain ascents, the wilderness quality of the terrain is essential to representing the way that text and world entangle each other in the sublime. Such an encounter as Petrarch has on Ventoux

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<sup>79</sup> “That’s a significant response to cultural constructs, especially for a professional surveyor” (Howarth 85).

<sup>80</sup> M.H. Abrams’s study *Natural Supernaturalism* traces this transition through the work of the Romantics: the longing for unity and redemption transferred from the theological to the natural realm. See also Louis Dupré: *Passage to Modernity*.



would not have been available to him in his little garden in Avignon. Nor would Thoreau find it easy to recognize the blurred boundaries between text and nature in Concord's town square. Wilderness is opposed to garden and city alike, as terrain bent to human will, rather than standing outside of it. Thus in some texts, wilderness is the realm of struggle and madness. Nash contends that scripture— especially the story of Eden and Man's ejection from it, "embedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites" (15). However, wilderness also acquired meaning as a testing ground for the virtuous, a place where visions might be granted, as in the case of these mountain tales. As such it was where the Israelites ventured to be purged and purified, to make them worthy of the promised land. As Nash notes, wilderness was "the environment of evil and hardship *where spiritual catharsis occurred*. Jesus emerged from the wilderness prepared to speak for God" (17).<sup>81</sup> Certainly for the Transcendentalists, and those who influenced them, venturing into the wilderness was not a search for wickedness. Rather, suggests Roderick Nash, "one's chance of attaining moral perfection and knowing God were *maximized* by entering wilderness" (86). The image of the mountain as the latter kind of wilderness is important for understanding how Petrarch and Thoreau not only experience their attempts to ascend, but also how they represent them. In Petrarch's case, his account of his spiritual and physical ascent works to critique the allegorical standards and techniques of similar accounts familiar to him. The ascent fails not because he is too focused on the world, nor because he is too focused on the text, but because he fails to see the Word as present in the world. Thoreau's encounter with Katahdin does not even occur on its peak, but in a befogged non-place on a ridge below the summit. He is held in suspension by a conjunction of natural conditions and a flawed map and text. The sublime,

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<sup>81</sup> Emphasis mine.

however, occurs in his case because of his recognition that as inhospitable as he found nature on Katahdin, it was not alien. Though it was hostile, it was still kin—and though it forced him to ransack his stores of literature for apt expressions of the sublime, it did not cow him into silence. Rather, Thoreau recognizes that the limits of language are not as absolute as he may have feared. In both accounts, the mountaintop “rends” the skein of text, even as that skein reveals the contours of the mountain.

## Chapter Three

### Concord and Colorado: Reading the River with Henry David Thoreau and John Wesley Powell

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.

T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages”

*Four Quartets*

To write of rivers is to write at once of the entanglement between civilization and wild nature. Although human aspirations for the natural and theological sublime often reside on the summits of the mountains, away from and above human habitation, the river valleys and deltas occupy a central position in the earliest accounts of human activity. The story of their harnessing and domestication is the story of humanity’s effort to sustain civilization: from the birth of cities between the Tigris and Euphrates, to the projected vast production of power in China’s Three Gorges Dam project on the Yang-Tse. If mountains are the sites of the mathematical sublime, rivers are the sites of the dynamic—of power: agricultural, electrical, and political. As conduits for power, rivers also frequently serve as vehicles for a sort of apocalyptic sublime: dead rivers, the polluted Cuyahoga bursting into flame, the constant shaking, humming and vibration of the colossal U.S. Army Corps of Engineers locks at Morgan City above New Orleans as they force the Mississippi to keep its current channel instead of spilling into the Atchafalaya Basin.<sup>82</sup> To consider the river solely as a construction of text, then, would be to ignore the very real ways in which it is implicated not only in the natural, but also in the political realm. However, to consider

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<sup>82</sup> An excellent brief introduction to this state of affairs on the Mississippi is in John McPhee’s essay “Atchafalaya,” collected in *The Control of Nature* (New York, 1990).

the river solely as a set, more or less broad, of differential material relations, would miss the way in which human classification of rivers—human assessment of the purpose of rivers—affects the material conditions of those flows themselves.

In examining the way literature and matter are implicated in each other in the question of the river, this chapter takes up two works in which rivers figure as centrally as the texts their authors produce about them: Henry David Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and John Wesley Powell's *The Exploration of the Colorado River Basin and its Canyons*. This chapter differs from the others in this study in several ways. First, it concerns two works of nonfiction. Second, it concerns two men from the United States, writing in English about rivers located in the U.S.. Third, it concerns two men who published within 30 years of each other. There are, in turn, several reasons for these choices. First, in considering these specific accounts, it enables the possibility of considering the domestication of these rivers without the requirement of pushing through enormous volumes of myth and iconography associated with the grander historical rivers, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. The Rhine, the Thames, the Danube, the Nile, the Amazon, the Mississippi—all would require enormous literary historical accounts even to make a start, and this current chapter is less a study of history than it is of process. Second, in considering nonfiction accounts, this chapter may focus on the way in which authors attempting to write accurately about nature rely on self-consciously literary language to convey their experience. Last, in taking up the writing of two 19<sup>th</sup> century men, writing in the first person, this chapter engages with the core of the ecocritical canon: the aesthetic of contact with nature, and the experience of nature in text, filtered through the consciousness of an "I" who addresses readers. Both texts are distinctly 19<sup>th</sup> century American, but they also partake in European—and in Thoreau's case in Eastern—literary and theological traditions. Thoreau and Powell both knew

how to put away books and get outside, but neither one, as this study will show, was able entirely to get “outside” the text, nor would either of them have wanted to.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the ways in which various theorists, critics, and historians have attempted to construe rivers and their connection to the world of human action. The approach will continue in its idiosyncratic way, drawing from Heidegger, from Deleuze and Guattari, from a variety of cultural and historical sources—without ever becoming “Heideggerian” or “Deleuzian” or an exercise in cultural history. After that survey, the study takes up Thoreau’s account of his journey on two local rivers: the Concord and the Merrimack. When Thoreau and his brother undertake their journey, the rivers are nearing the end of their involvement in trade, the railroad beginning to take over the duties of the once-domesticated river. In the decade-long process of writing his account, Thoreau employs text to un-domesticate these rivers—in a sense, to make them wild again. In so doing, he seeks to come to terms with his brother’s death. As Thoreau attempts to make the river young again he turns also to the earliest writings he can find, as exemplified by Hindu texts. Last, this chapter considers Powell’s post-expedition account of his foray down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon—the first man known to have done so. The movement of the Colorado is the converse of that of the Concord and Merrimack: once wild, with the Powell expedition it becomes ripe for management. It is not the kind of harnessing the nation’s leaders had hoped at the time, but it became, and remained, a vessel for the settling of the west—not through navigation and trade, but through dams and power. Powell’s account also draws attention to the way in which matter—and not simply humans—can be creative, even artistic. In considering these first-person accounts, the chapter suggests that these rivers are never entirely either wild or domesticated; their uses change according to what a variety of circumstances will allow. Nor are the accounts of these journeys

as purely expressions of the authors' contact with nature as their language might have their readers believe. The encounter between human and nature—between text and world—is a tangle, and in this tangle can be seen a version of the pastoral based on wilderness.

### **Gathering by the River**

One spring day in 1981, the novelist/essayist/environmental anarchist Edward Abbey<sup>83</sup> addressed a group of Earth First! activists at a sort of anti-shrine for environmentalists—the unholy place in the country: the Glen Canyon Dam.<sup>84</sup> There, the group unrolled an enormous ribbon down the face of the dam, giving it the appearance of a huge crack forming in the concrete. As an accompaniment to the stunt, Abbey spoke in words calculated to echo those of the Biblical prophets:

Glen Canyon Dam is an insult to God's Creation, and if there is a God he will destroy it. And if there isn't we will take care of it, one way or another, and if we don't then Mother Nature most certainly will. Give her a few more centuries and the Colorado River will fill Lake Foul [Powell] with mud, right to the brim, and plug its penstocks and jam [its] pressure tubes with sand; then the river will come flowing over the top and Glen Canyon Dam will erode away, rapidly, down to grade level, down to the bedrock sandstone of Glen Canyon. ... Open once again to sunlight, these canyons will awake from the dead.

...  
The good news I bring will certainly come to pass. The collapse of Glen Canyon Dam is as inevitable as the rising of the moon, or the revival of spring, or the flow of the river home to the sea. Let the engineers build fifty more dams between here and the Rockies, they can only retard, they cannot stop, the irresistible processes of erosion and renewal. The mountains and plateaus will continue to be uplifted, the rains and snows will fall, the waters will plunge downward back to their source, again and again and again.

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<sup>83</sup> Abbey wrote an essay that mirrors Thoreau's *Concord and Merrimack* in many ways, in which he describes a kayak trip down the Green River in Utah with a copy of *Walden*: "Down the River with Henry Thoreau."

<sup>84</sup> The completed dam's locks closed in 1963.

Abbey's speech encapsulates the way in which various interests have pressed rivers into service.<sup>85</sup> His language is a mixture of science and prophecy—of God's righteous wrath and its instruments artificial and natural: free human will and, that failing, siltation. Encompassed in his depiction of the fouling of the river are the tensions between human freedom, human rhetoric, and natural determinism. With a change in differential relations of heat, cold, water, wind, human activity, the dam, Abbey notes, is only a *temporary* obstruction of flow. He ably depicts the sacred realm of wild nature and the unholy realm of human artifice in the language of the inevitable hydrological cycle—a language at least as old as water springing from the rocks in *Exodus*. The great sins, Abbey suggests here and elsewhere, are human pride and greed—a willingness to treat the sacred, “a wild river, part of nature's bloodstream” as “a damned resource...As if it were no more than a vein of coal, a field of cabbages, a truckload of cow manure” (177).

Whether he was aware of it or not (and very likely he was), Abbey's argument closely mirrors one made by Martin Heidegger several decades earlier in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology.” Of course, Abbey certainly was less immediately concerned about the problem of technology forcing Being to self-disclose. However, read in conjunction with this essay, Abbey's speech highlights the language of sanctity and defilement implicit in Heidegger's treatment of the dam on the Rhine—“The monstrousness that reigns here” (321). Most important to Heidegger was the difference between the power plant and the bridge. The latter, he writes, leaves the river open to the fourfold—earth and sky, mortals and gods—by not impeding the river's flow, yet allowing humans to cross it under the sky. By contrast, damming the river, and

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<sup>85</sup> It also expresses a set of linked relations that Gilles Deleuze might have appreciated: “the hardest rocks become soft and fluid matter on the geological time scale of millions of years” (*Difference and Repetition*, 2).

forcing it through turbines to generate electricity turns the conjunction into something that is no longer primarily river: “What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station” (321). The question here is not that the river is ever purely or entirely river; it is always what it is in conjunction with human activity, according to Heidegger (the “old wooden bridge” allows the river to remain river). Heidegger’s concern is converting elements of the world into objects of manipulation, rather than “letting them be”—both in Abbey’s sense of “leaving the goddam river alone” and in the sense of *poesis*, clearing the way for the world to manifest itself. Instead, the application of some kinds of technology to the world converts the objects of technology into “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) (322). The earth becomes a supply of ore and minerals; farming becomes mechanized food production; air becomes a standing reserve of nitrogen (320). Perhaps worse, as humanity forces the world into the role of reserve, it forces itself into that role as well: “[D]oes not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing reserve?” (323). As man employs technology, he turns himself into standing reserve, even as he claims to be the master of nature. The formulation is popular among certain Deep Ecologists: when humans violate the purity of the world, they turn themselves into objects as well.

Central to this process, according to some writers, is the effort by the State to describe and, ultimately, manage, the hydrological cycle. Rather than a static, perfected model of how water circulates among ocean, rivers, precipitation, and groundwater, what various cultures have termed the hydrological cycle has changed dramatically over time, as Yi-Fu Tuan demonstrates. The circular motion of water on earth is an ancient idea, according to Tuan, mostly likely traceable to India or the Near East. “By the fifth or fourth century B.C. a particular aspect of it—the water cycle—was already known to the Greeks near one end of the Eurasian continent and



perhaps to the Chinese at the other” (22). The various conceptions of the cycle depended in large part on two functions, according to Tuan: the availability of water (whether through rivers or precipitation), and the belief, from about the seventeenth century in Europe, “that the configuration of the earth—no less than the motion of the stars—manifested the wisdom and providence of God” (69). There is, of course, no point in arguing with God; the hydrological cycle operates as described, a perfect circle of water within the earthly sphere. The key is the perfection of form and order: “A world consisting solely of cyclic events is a perfectly ordered world, no more subject to progressive change than perfection, or God” (156). According to Karl Wittfogel, the State has an interest in maintaining the narrative of the perfection of this model.<sup>86</sup> That is, the harnessing and management of the hydrological cycle is a display of which the State can make maximum use, both in psychological effect (in part through the hydraulic society’s “monumental” (43) architectural style) and in the generation of power. As with any ecosystem, dearth is the limiting factor of any natural growth.<sup>87</sup> Control of such limited resources as there may be, however, is one of the most important sources of State power. In arid environments, Wittfogel contends, the administration of hydraulic resources affords the State enormous power—not only over the natural resources, but over people dependent on them. “To say that the masters of hydraulic society are great builders is only another way of saying they are great organizers” (50). That is, the building projects of the State are but part of its drive to administer resources, whether physically or through text.

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<sup>86</sup> Wittfogel’s assertion, however, that the State is the originator of hydraulic projects is problematic. It accepts the notion that order stems from the State rather than from self-organizing groups and individuals which the State then bribes or coerces into service. See Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, in which Worster chides Wittfogel for his “anticommunist tendentiousness” (21). Also see Protevi, “Water” (2007).

<sup>87</sup> This is, of course, grossly simplified.

However, the relation between manipulating nature, and “allowing it to be,” may not be as binary as Heidegger might contend. There is a tangle inherent in the understanding of rivers between the use to which they are put and the reasons and justifications various groups furnish for such use. That is, the way a society portrays rivers is entangled with the use to which that river is to be put. David Macauley suggests that studying the way water has been domesticated is essential to an understanding of the relation between technology and the environment, between artifice and nature. A great deal of the water humans encounter is neither purely artificial nor purely natural, Macauley contends, “rather, water is frequently filtered through a vast technological nexus that not only redirects its force and flow but changes or multiplies its meanings” (4). The river as a concept is as protean as its element, suggests Wyman Herenden, shifting between linear time and cyclical time, between atomization and continuum (3). The key to understanding rivers, despite the apparatus of State control, is the continuum. Each drop of water in a river has passed through some other part of the hydrological cycle. River water is rain, ground water, seawater, steam. The banks of the river extend to the village or the farm through which the river passes, and the roads that connect them to the city. In this sense, according to Herenden, attempting to consider one portion of a river (between, New Orleans and Natchez, Mississippi, say—or between Mainz and Strasbourg) is to study a non-river: “to do so would annihilate the river, turning it into a still life, leaving us with a segment of the river as it never existed in nature” (4). Rivers connect all water in the cycle as the riverbanks connect all civilization. This continuum also applies to the application of art to nature, Herenden writes: “It is largely the art that has been imposed on geography that converts it to landscape and thus gives it meaning” (156).

Again, however, the relation is neither binary nor permanent; it is continually in process of passing between states. The river passes from the physical to the textual, from the natural to the historical, from environment to politics—and back again. No state is constant; no state is without context; no state lacks internal and external tensions—including both the material and the textual. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “smooth” versus the “striated” space is helpful here. Smooth space is the realm of the Nomad or the War Machine—able to be everywhere at once, and determining points by motion. The presence of the Nomad indicates the smooth space. Striated space, on the other hand is administered by the State, channelized, directed between points and defined by these channelized routes (*ATP* 474). Neither condition ever is pure. The state always seeks to striate smooth space, and striated space can be smoothed as well (for example, the sea can claim a once-developed coastline). The movement of the system, not its status at any given moment, is most important—and mixing does not make the states the same: “the de facto mixes do not preclude a de jure, or abstract, distinction between the two spaces” (475). To that end, Worster makes a strong distinction between a living river, a smooth, turbulent space (if striated geologically), and a dead river, striated, subject to state purpose: “Quite simply, the modern canal, unlike a river, is not an ecosystem. It is simplified, abstracted Water, rigidly separated from the earth and firmly directed to raise food, fill pipes and make money” (5).<sup>88</sup> When Worster refers to the death of the Colorado River beginning in 1936 with the Hoover Dam, he means that the river stopped being simply a river and became a natural resource—Heideggerian *Bestand*—or an element in a Deleuzian State apparatus of capture. In Worster’s analysis, with the succession of dams on the Colorado the river becomes merely “a part of nature that had died and been reborn as money” (276). Rivers, as this chapter will show, undergo all

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<sup>88</sup> Of course, this is not technically accurate: canals are ecosystems, sometimes rather diverse ones.

sorts of transformations. Worster might have located the death of the Colorado too late—the demise may have started the moment Powell’s accounts of his journey appeared in the press. However, as Abbey indicates, the death of a river likely is not permanent—there is always the possibility of the sort of rebirth he longs for on the Colorado. Thoreau, too, will show that rivers that have been domesticated, dammed, made to serve, can be born again not as money, but as text.

### **The River Born Again: Thoreau on Concord and Merrimack**

When Thoreau and his brother John set out on their journey in August 1839, the Concord River was no wilderness. And the Merrimack, in the words of Thoreau’s biographer Robert D. Richardson, was “was one long, managed mill stream” (228). However, in the decade between the trip and the publication of *A Week*, the river, the account, and Thoreau’s life changed. According to Linck Johnson, Thoreau began drafting his account in 1840 as an essay for *The Dial*, but it was not long before he put the manuscript aside to focus on other work. Then in January 1842, Thoreau’s brother John died, and Thoreau revisited in his memory the trip the two of them had taken together three years earlier. Unfortunately for Thoreau, he had not planned originally on writing about the trip, and he had almost no notes about it. As a result, Thoreau dove into his *Journal* (particularly the *Journal* from 1837-1844), drawing what he called the “Long Book” from it. This became the first draft of *A Week*. Johnson notes that Thoreau’s work on the project began in earnest sometime after the moved to Walden, on July 4, 1845. He completed the second draft in 1847 and published the work himself in 1849.<sup>89</sup> It is one of two

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<sup>89</sup> This was a financially disastrous decision, leaving Thoreau in possession of several hundred copies of his book and \$300 in debt. According to Robert Sattelmeyer, Thoreau did not pay the debt off until 1853, and he had to take work as surveyor and pencil maker to do it. The commercial failure (he sold 200 copies of his book total) also led to a rift with Emerson that was never entirely mended. See esp. Sattelmeyer, Johnson, Garber.

major works Thoreau completed in his life, and in many ways it reads as a sort of first draft of *Walden* in its themes and concerns. It interpolates long meditations on literature, history, and religion into its river travel narrative in a way that frequently seems uneven. However, Linck Johnson, building on the earlier work of Carl Hovde, shows not only that Thoreau considered *A Week* to be a unified narrative, but also how he went about composing it—from anecdotal writing in the *Journal*, to the first draft of the “Long Book,” to the later 1849 draft.<sup>90</sup> To make up for the lack of notes on the actual journey, Thoreau relies heavily on his commonplace book and his journals, from which he drew accounts of other excursions into the wilderness for the detail they provide about the outdoors. The result, as Johnson notes, is “less a product of direct observation than of recollection, imagination, and craft” (3).

Johnson is correct to note how important elements other than direct observation were to composing the bulk of the text. However, although Thoreau relies on his *Journals* and on accounts of other journeys he took with his brother and without him, Thoreau’s narrative also depends heavily on his search for and encounter with a portion of nature less developed or domesticated than the town of Concord. The brothers’ trip took them down the slow-moving Concord to its confluence with the Merrimack, then up the Merrimack where they left the boat, and journeyed into the White Mountains for another week. From there the pair returned to the boat and rowed home. In essence, Thoreau spent about a week on the rivers, but the actual journey he recounts takes two weeks. Of course the narrative is as much about the evolution of his lifelong encounter with nature as it is about his relation with classical literature, European (especially German and English) Romanticism, and Hindu theology. Critics such as Daniel Peck

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<sup>90</sup> Specifically, Johnson credits Hovde’s dissertation: “The Writing of Henry D. Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: A Study of Textual Materials and Techniques*.” PhD diss. Princeton, 1956.

have indicated the “elegiac” tone of the work, the expression of Thoreau’s desire “to recover from time a lost world” (12). This lost world is a mode of pastoral longing for an Arcadia that resides nowhere entirely, but only partially in memory, literature, and nature itself. These are Thoreau’s tools for recovery of a world in which humans nurture a kinship with Nature, even as they remain in a sense alien to it. As Johnson observes, “*A Week* was thus composed of a carefully orchestrated series of excursions through New England, at once a pastoral realm, a primitive wilderness, and a bustling industrial region” (4). This chapter will show how Thoreau draws on the realm of natural experience as well as the world of text to construct a narrative about how each is implicated in the other. This entanglement between nature and text, as embodied by a man reading and remembering texts while encountering nonhuman nature, enables Thoreau to effect a sort of rebirth of nature in text, and a renewal of text in the encounter with nature.

In the narrative Thoreau constructs, the journey he took with John becomes more than just a jaunt on the river. It is, as Donald Worster notes, a “search for sensuous contact, for a visceral sense of belonging to the earth and its cycle of organisms” (78). The materials at hand for Thoreau include not only his vast experience of encounters with nonhuman nature, but also his colossal (if occasionally flawed) memory of literature and history. The expression of intimate contact—kinship—with nature is perhaps Thoreau’s trickiest obstacle due to his lack of notes from the actual journey. However, Thoreau frequently resorts to what Timothy Morton terms *ecomimesis*, the effort to evoke a (fake, kitchy) “real” natural world through the medium of text: “Nature writing tries to be ‘immediate’—to do without the processes of language and the artful construction of illusions. It wants to maintain the impression of directness” (125). This direct encounter, Morton reminds his readers, is illusory—a reified mode in itself. Far from presenting

nature as it is, free of value, full of nothing but experience, nature writers have an agenda, Morton suggests. “There *is* a point to nature writing. It wants to make us love nature” (152). However, the more successful the artistry in evoking the natural world, the more artificial the effort becomes—of necessity.<sup>91</sup> Thoreau certainly hopes his readers appreciate nature—“love nature” probably still is accurate. However, Thoreau is a master practitioner of *ecomimesis*, a skilled illusionist. When he describes, at a decade’s remove, his encounter with the river while lying on the bank of the Merrimack with his brother, Thoreau has another agenda that takes precedence:

With our heads so low in the grass, we heard the river whirling and sucking, and lapsing downward, kissing the shore as it went, sometimes rippling louder than usual, and again its mighty current making only a slight limpid trickling sound, as if our water-pail had sprung a leak, and the water were flowing into the grass by our side. (416)

The language Thoreau employs to convey the experience of lying on a riverbank, just out of sight of the water, but within earshot, refers not simply to the experience Thoreau had on the river ten years earlier. This is not a direct description of the experience one might have on the banks of the same river. However, it is a description whose language is informed by that trip—and the several subsequent trips Thoreau took on that river and several others. Thoreau is not intending *mimesis* in this passage; he is attempting a kind of description that will engender either confirmation (“Yes, I have experienced something similar.”) or offer new knowledge (“So *that’s* what it was like.”). It is not that Thoreau necessarily wants his readers to *love* nature; that love is not especially important to him, and, in any case, it cannot be developed in books.<sup>92</sup> Rather, Thoreau wants his readers to *envision* nature—to experience it as he does, and as they might, if

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<sup>91</sup> Morton here quotes Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “As soon as the artifact wants to prompt the illusion of the natural, it founders” (179).

<sup>92</sup> Thoreau specifically expresses his disdain for “the mealy-mouthed enthusiasm of the lover of Nature” (130).

they were to take a moment and regard it. Thoreau's account is a spur to readers to look up from the book and regard the world.

However, not only does Thoreau want his readers to see the countryside as he sees it; he wants them to experience the river journey in text as his narrative voice relates it. With the reading comes the seeing—in the imagination of the reader, or in the place where reading and imagination blend, as in Thoreau's narrative. This is a subtle bit of writing, Johnson suggests: "That *A Week* often seems spontaneous and immediate is a sign of his artistry, for some of its most vivid descriptions were either adapted from unrelated Journal entries, drawn from guidebooks, or based upon experiences during other journeys" (xiii). That Thoreau's description of his journey derives not immediately from direct experience, but rather through the filter of years, and memory, and journals referring to trips other than this one, does not matter to the immediate experience of the text. As Herenden explains: "[T]he distinction literary critics usually make between topographical description and *topothesia*—between the description of real landscapes and of imaginary ones shaped by rhetorical modes and literary genres—is not a genuine one; both are rhetorical modes that can complement one another" (119). In the case of Thoreau's river narrative, the blend stems from his real experience of the river, his real experience of other rivers, his memory, his reading, and his imagination. There are, in short, several modes of knowledge in operation in Thoreau's account, of which literary practice is just one element, and Thoreau's actual encounter with the river he describes is another.

It is important to bear in mind that Thoreau does not entirely reduce all nature to the operation of Reason or the unfolding of Mind, as his more platonically-inclined mentor Emerson does.<sup>93</sup> Nor does he claim that mind is simply an extension of nature, however. Thoreau

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<sup>93</sup> See, for example, "Nature": "It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are



understands (particularly after his unsuccessful attempt to summit the hostile Katahdin) that humans and nature are by no means identical. As James McIntosh explains: “His ‘nature’ is the nonhuman, external world of rocks, trees, and plants, oceans and rivers, animals and insects. It is felt by him as interrelated, as one; and it is for him sometimes not only the aggregate of things but also the single, surging life force that animates and organizes these things” (26). Thoreau is writing about a proto-ecological nature, a nature of *physis*, the total of relations between living and nonliving matter in his environment. That realm of nature is distinct from the realm of humanity, but humanity is enmeshed in nature—entangled in a realm that is always in some sense as much not-human as it is human. This entanglement, however, is not to be fought but cultivated, according to Thoreau, under the term “kinship.” This kinship is not identity. Thoreau is no totemist; nor is he a Spinozan who views himself as simply a node in universal matter. Thoreau suggests a mode of relating to nature that includes understanding and respect, even as it precludes identity.

In writing of the Concord, for example, Thoreau mentions the Billerica Dam and canals, and the factories at Lowell, which ended the migrations of the schools of shad, alewife, and salmon that used to pass upriver. It offers Thoreau an opportunity to rail against “the superficial and selfish phil-*anthropy* of man.” Humanity’s focus on itself, Thoreau suggests, blinds it to the virtues of the fish “bearing up against a hard destiny, not admired by that fellow creature who can appreciate it!” (40). Thoreau addresses the fish in a moment of self-parodic pathos: “Poor shad! where is thy redress? When Nature gave thee instinct, gave she thee the heart to bear thy fate? Still wandering the sea in thy scaly armor to inquire humbly at the mouths of rivers if man

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emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind, and that state of mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (14).

has perchance left them free for thee to enter” (39). In personifying the shad as at once armed warriors and beggars, Thoreau engages in a bit of mock-epic directed more at the people who decline to notice the nature around them than at the fish. It is a technique of encountering the humble that Thoreau would employ later in *Walden*’s chapter “The Bean Field.” The language is self-consciously literary, recalling at once romances of chivalry and their parodies. But the natural relations, the disappearance of the fish from the river, are no less true because of the way in which Thoreau chooses to address them. Thoreau seeks a relation with nature, then plunges the human into the natural, recognizing both the human and non-human potential for *poesis*:

I can fancy that it would be a luxury to stand up to stand up to one’s chin in some retired swamp a whole summer day, scenting the wild honeysuckle and bilberry blows, and lulled by the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes! A day passed in the society of those Greek sages, such as described in the Banquet of Xenophon, would not be comparable with the dry wet of decayed cranberry vines and the fresh Attic salt of the moss-beds. Say twelve hours of genial and familiar converse with the leopard frog; the sun to rise behind alder and dogwood, and climb buoyantly to his meridians of two hands’ breadth, and finally sink to rest behind some bold western hummock. (375)

The picture is frankly comic: the image of the woodsman-scholar Thoreau plunged up to his neck in a summertime swamp, the better to contemplate how favorably the gnats and mosquitoes compare to the witty, urbane, repartee of the *Symposium*. Thoreau, clearly, is not an extension of the cranberry vines and moss. Nor is it at all clear what he and the leopard frog would have to say to each other. Nor, certainly, do the mosquitoes and gnats have much to say about Attic literature—nor is their “converse” especially enjoyable for anyone without a masochistic streak (though their depredations may be ignored). The point of this passage is the simultaneous interaction with the human (Greek literature) and the not-human. It is a fantasy of the sort of reading “out of doors” that allows Thoreau to be fully human—both akin to nature and informed in text. In describing this scene, Thoreau values immersion in, and conversation with, nature over

a conversation with literature. He opts for direct experience over the secondary relation to the world through text.<sup>94</sup>

In a bit of extraordinary irony, Thoreau employs this filter medium of text to foster the illusion of immediacy. However, despite Morton's suggestion that *ecomimesis* generally intends to foster a direct experience of and love for nature, Thoreau's strongest moments of illusory immediacy come in moments of direct address to the reader, and they generally introduce reveries on *text*—not on the beauty, grandeur, or horror of the surrounding *terrain*. “As we cannot distinguish objects in this dense fog, let me tell this story at more length” (221). The direct address to the reader, coupled with the offhand description of the natural environment, places the reader inside the text as well as inside the environment in which Thoreau and his brother find themselves in the course of their journey. The fog is so dense; we may as well share a story until it lifts. That Thoreau and his brother actually encountered fog on the river is likely but ultimately irrelevant to its deployment in the narrative: Thoreau uses it to give himself a chance for narrative, not descriptive, digression. That is, the illusory fog may have had a real counterpart, but in the narrative it serves only to establish grounds for a no less real, if digressive, part of the account. This is not the only occasion on which Thoreau employs this technique. One digression begins “[w]hen compelled by a shower to take shelter under a tree” (374). Another serves to pass the time “while the lock is filling—for our voyage this forenoon furnishes but few instances of importance” (249). The description of the voyage unfolds as Thoreau narrates it, and the immediacy of the text reinforces the immediacy of the experience of nature in the reader's mind and memory. In Thoreau's case then, the immediate description of the real-world journey as enacted in the text (and, presumably, in the mind of the reader) enables the textual description

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<sup>94</sup> Emerson replied to this passage: “My dear Henry, A frog was made to live in a swamp, but a man was not meant to live in a swamp. Yours ever, R.” (301)

of nature to highlight narrative digression—even as the digressions call attention to the “natural” (in the text, anyway) circumstances that allow the reader to pursue them.

Thoreau’s river journey, then, is a singular sort of pastoral—one that seeks not an escape from culture, nor an identity with a pure nonhuman world, but a way to immerse oneself in kinship with nature.<sup>95</sup> This exploration of kinship literally occurs in Thoreau’s memory, and in his careful stitching of multiple sources of natural description. His experience of nature, as he relates it, relies on the operation of memory, imagination, and text. Yet underlying the acts of mind, Thoreau notes, is a physical world: “I am glad to find that nature wears so well. The landscape is indeed something real, and solid, and sincere, and I have not put my foot through it yet” (438). Thoreau is a peculiar sort of mystic when he calls for this sense of kinship with nature. At the core of it is Thoreau’s recognition that humanity is sundered from nature, and has to be “naturalized” in much the same way he might be “spiritualized” in another context: “Men nowhere, east or west, live yet a *natural* life, round which the vine clings, and which the elm willingly shadows. Man would desecrate it by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only to be spiritualized, but *naturalized*, on the soil of the earth” (474). Thoreau’s imagery here—of the clinging, entangling vine, of the overshadowing elm—is no accident, evoking as it does the separate human, yet entangled in the nature surrounding him. The coupling of the natural and the spiritual is obvious to Thoreau: they are different, yet implicated in each other. That is, the human is not to become nature; nor is nature to become human. However, humans are to recognize their kinship with nature—the way in which they are tied to their environment. Thoreau’s work is less a travelogue than a memory poem or an elegy

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<sup>95</sup> Ning Yu refers to it as a “counter-pastoral,” in line with a reading of Leo Marx’s work. However, it is possible that the presence of industry in the American pastoral landscape does not challenge the American pastoral, as Yu contends. Rather, in this sense, the machine was always already present in the garden, an essential part of the character of the pastoral itself.

on the death of his brother, as Peck notes. Johnson, too, sees a parallel between Thoreau's work and Milton's: "Like Milton in 'Lycidas,' Thoreau tried to place his brother's death within the context of nature's seasonal cycle of death and rebirth," he writes, "But in contrast to Milton, Thoreau looked solely to the natural world for consolation rather than seeking it in a realm of supernatural order" (xiii). Peck might have written: Thoreau looked to his *memory* of the natural world for consolation. After all, Thoreau is willing to take his consolation where he can find it: whether in experience of the natural world or in text.

Although Thoreau's account of his (1844) ascent of Saddleback Mountain has led several critics to compare the *Week* with William Wordsworth's *Prelude*,<sup>96</sup> the operation of memory and text on the realm of experience in nature gives it more kinship with "Lines Composed above Tintern Abbey." The trip unfolds as it is read, but it is clear from the text that to the degree that the narrative journey is a journey through a natural landscape, it also is a journey through memory and text. The river has changed in the decade since Thoreau and his brother undertook their expedition:

Since our voyage the railroad on the bank has been extended and there is now but little boating on the Merrimack. All kinds of produce and stores were formerly conveyed by water, but now nothing is carried up the stream, and almost wood and bricks alone are carried down, and these are also carried on the railroad. (264)

This is a description of the river at the time that Thoreau drafts his narrative, but the river down which his narrative conducts his reader is, at least in part, the river of ten years earlier. The river as Thoreau depicts it in the *Week* relies at least as much on text and memory as it does on his

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<sup>96</sup> H. Daniel Peck, for example, held that Thoreau intended the Saddleback ascent to be the central event of the work by contending that an earlier account of an ascent of Agiocochook (Mt. Washington) sets up the (rather anticlimactic, really) ascent of Saddleback. However, Milder refutes that line of thought fairly effectively by showing that the *Journals* (2: 266-69) indicate the Saddleback account was a very late addition—after Thoreau had decided to edit out a section on the brothers' weeklong trip into the White Mountains.

experiences as they might actually have occurred. Robert Milder suggests that the *Week* be read as a quest for the primitive sources of poetry and meaning in human existence—a sort of fusion of history and experience: “*A Week* imagines a paradise graspable only in poetic vision and communicable through a gauziness of language and reflection far removed from the locks and canal boats of physical voyage” (35). That is, this quest must unfold in text at least to the same degree that it does in any natural setting. Thoreau, according to Milder, was seeking not some physical pastoral setting in New England, “but the ideal pastoralism he found in the classics: Billerica Atticized” (33). Thoreau’s library and his commonplace book furnished the materials for this approach, which relies on his memory of and interaction with literature—in much the same way his interaction with nature also affects the narrative. As Sattelmeyer’s study of Thoreau’s library notes: “his writings reflect this bookish side no less than this love of outdoor life” (xi).

As noted earlier, German Idealism provided a basis (if greatly altered and inaccurate) for a great deal of Transcendentalist writing about mind and nature.<sup>97</sup> Also important were English Romantics who popularized the writing of German Idealists in their own work—men like S.T. Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, whom Emerson befriended and championed in the United States. Key to the influence of these works on the Transcendentalists was the relation between nature and mind. As Roderick Nash observes: “natural objects assumed importance because, if rightly seen, they reflected universal spiritual truths” (85). This intuition has much in common with Coleridge’s “Imagination,” by which an individual mind can participate in the Universal Mind. That is, as Coleridge contends in his *Biographia Literaria*, in apprehending nature one intuitively feels the presence and will of spirit: “The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime

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<sup>97</sup> There is a slightly more extensive discussion of the influence of German Idealism and English Romanticism on Thoreau’s writing in chapter two.

Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (378). Carlyle, too, attempted to show how humans participate in the divine. In the chapter “Natural Supernaturalism” from *Sartor Resartus*, for example, Prof. Diogenes Teufelsdröckh expresses a moment in which he recognizes the foundation of matter in spirit: “These Limbs, whence had we them; this stormy Force; this life-blood with its burning Passion? They are dust and shadow; a Shadow-system gathered round our ME; wherein, through some moments or years, the Divine Essence is to be revealed in the Flesh” (201). This vision of the material body as “dust and shadow” a pale receptacle or imperfect reflection of spirit, has a sympathetic counterpart, Emerson and Thoreau found, in Hindu and Buddhist scripture.

Thoreau read more deeply and widely in Hindu literature than Emerson did—and for the most part he read the works more sensitively as well.<sup>98</sup> However, as Alan Hodder notes, Thoreau was subject to a degree of orientalism with regard to India.<sup>99</sup> He operated on the basis of “a Kiplingesque opposition: India was the land of contemplation and mysticism, Europe the land of reason and activity” (435).<sup>100</sup> When Thoreau writes of his contemplative moments during his river voyage, he often turns to quotes from Hindu literature. Ellen Raghavan and Barry Wood have identified 47 such quotes, and they note that most of the passages come from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Institutes of Hindu Law* (which Thoreau refers to as the “Laws of Menu,” using the old spelling of “Manu”). The interpolation of Hindu texts with travel narrative and quotes from

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<sup>98</sup> Arthur Christy is generally acknowledged to have pursued the first major study of the Hindu sources of much of Thoreau’s thought in 1932 with his work: *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott*. New York: Columbia UP, 1932.

<sup>99</sup> Alan Hodder notes that Hindu texts drew a great deal of attention from German romantics such as Herder and Schlegel as well. This may not be entirely accidental.

<sup>100</sup> Hodder points out that, notwithstanding Thoreau’s general respect for Hindu literature and thought, he failed to escape “imbibing various affirmative platitudes of the Oriental Renaissance” (411). Chief among these platitudes are images of Asia as the source of ancient wisdom, but subject to serene inaction.

European writers annoyed some of the book's reviewers. For example, in his 1849 review for the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, James Russell Lowell remarked "What ... have Concord and Merrimack to do with Boodh [i.e. "Buddha"]?" (404).<sup>101</sup> Of course, in the case of Thoreau's elegiac description of the river voyage with his brother, Hindu thought has quite a bit to do with his project of locating human life within natural cycles of flow and ebb. As Milder observes: "His quest in *A Week* had been directed toward a Greco-Hindu paradise located at the imagined origins of civilized time" (39).

To this end, perhaps the most important of the Hindu texts to Thoreau's thought was William Jones's 1794 translation of the *Institutes*, an ancient code of Hindu law which held that the man "who perceives in his own soul the supreme soul present in all creatures... shall be absorbed at last in the highest essence, even that of the Almighty himself" (109). The *Laws'* description of spirit-inhabited nature would have been of particular interest to the Thoreau of *A Week*, interested as he became in the cycle of activity and dormancy in nature:

52. When that divine one wakes, then this world stirs; when he slumbers tranquilly, then the universe sinks to sleep.

53. But when he reposes in calm sleep, the corporeal beings, whose nature is action, desist from their actions and mind becomes inert.

54. When they are absorbed all at once in that great soul, then he who is the soul of all beings sweetly slumbers, free from all care and occupation.

55. When this (soul) has entered darkness, it remains for a long time united with the organs (of sensation), but performs not its functions; it then leaves the corporeal frame.

56. When, being clothed with minute particles (only), it enters into vegetable or animal seed, it then assumes, united (with the fine body), a (new) corporeal frame.

57. Thus he, the imperishable one, by (alternately) waking and slumbering, incessantly revivifies and destroys this whole movable and immovable (creation).

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Hodder, and also in Carl. T. Jackson's *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth Century Explorations*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981.



Richardson notes that Thoreau “was deeply, repeatedly, and lastingly moved by the book; he response was that of a strongly religious nature to a great revelation” (107). The depiction of an ineffable force underlying the cycle of life, constantly undergoing death and rebirth, made the *Institutes* a special text for Thoreau. “Most books,” he observes, “belong to the house and street only, and in the fields their leaves feel very thin. They are bare and obvious...Nature lies far and fair behind them all” (183). The *Institutes*, on the other hand, are “true for the widest horizon, and read out of doors has relation to the dim mountain line, and is native and original there” (183). While the works of the Romantics depicted humans plunged into Nature, the Hindu text as Thoreau describes it, actually belongs to the realm of nature: “[T]he very locusts and crickets of a summer day are but later or earlier glosses on the Dherma Sastra of the Hindoos, a continuation of the sacred code” (184). As the primordial origin of philosophy, Hindu thought for Thoreau becomes a source for the means to put true names to things. Hodder calls this effort “natural language par excellence” (419), adding that Thoreau had adopted a version of the Brahmin outlook that the Vedas constitute the alphabet from which derive the natural names of all the things in the universe.

The *Bhagavad Gita* also plays an important role in Thoreau’s river journey in its exploration of the tension and cooperation between practice (*karma*) and discipline or training (*yoga*), note Raghavan and Wood (97).<sup>102</sup> Thoreau quotes from Charles Wilkins’s 1785 translation of the *Gita* (the first available in English), in discussing the unity of mind and action, of text and world: “Children only, and not the learned, speak of the speculative and the practical doctrines as two. They are but one, for both obtain the selfsame end, and the place which is

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<sup>102</sup> Laurence Buell suggests that Emerson first came into contact with the work through philosopher Victor Cousin’s French précis of the first two chapters, published in Paris in 1828. It is not inconceivable that Thoreau learned of the work through that means as well, but there is no clear evidence to that effect.

gained by the followers of the one is gained by the followers of the other” (Thoreau 112; *Gita* V, 4).<sup>103</sup> This passage illustrates nicely the way in which Thoreau conceives of his project as requiring effort on two fronts: the speculative and the practical. In short, it is not enough to have made the river journey, nor simply to recreate it in his mind. Rather, in producing a text that seeks to return language and the terrain through which he passes to its youth, Thoreau is attempting to grapple with foundational principles of being. The *Gita*’s concern with the quality of the world and the eternal, indestructible nature of life fits nicely with Thoreau’s attempt to address his brother’s death in a description of the flow of river and text. In chapter two of the *Gita*, the world is at once real, illusory, natural, and susceptible to shaping by human thought and action:

The wise neither grieve for the dead nor for the living. I myself never was not, nor thou, nor all the princes of the earth; nor shall we ever hereafter cease to be ... A thing imaginary hath no existence, whilst that which is true is a stranger to non-entity. By those who look into the principles of things, the design of each is seen.<sup>104</sup> (II, 15-18)

This life that is impossible to destroy, that is already eternal, correlates neatly with the experience of nature that Thoreau seeks in his river trip. Affected as it is by rivers named and named again, turned to one practice and then another, this life is what remains whether human agency focuses on it or not. What the river is, then, is a confluence of human and natural activity: of bed gradient and water volume, of history and name. In the Hindu texts, Thoreau is seeking the way to the primordial name for the universe, and that name has to be sought in the experience

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<sup>103</sup> Although this is the edition in which Thoreau encountered it, Wilkins’s translation is stiff by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, and he was unfamiliar (as was nearly everyone in Europe at the time) with the principles of Hindu philosophy. Two good recent editions are Barbara Stoler Miller (1987) and Stephen Mitchell (2002). Another graceful translation is by Christopher Isherwood and Swami Prabhavanada (1944).

<sup>104</sup> Of course, the context of this passage is Krishna’s urging of Arjuna to take part in a battle he would rather avoid. The idea is that one must act without anxiety for the fruits of one’s actions. As Cousins explains it: “to act with integrity is ‘to act as if one acted not’ (*si on n’agissait pas*); that is, in a spirit of nonattachment to the fruits of one’s action” (Buell, *Imagination* 173).

at once of text and world: “All the moral laws are readily translated into natural philosophy, for we have only to restore the primitive meaning of the words by which they are expressed, or to attend to their literal instead of their metaphorical sense” (452).<sup>105</sup>

Thoreau sees the realm of text in much the same way he considers the natural world. Thoreau longs for a sort of natural *poesis* in his writing, but he constructs his literature much as a farmer might a wall. Found text is material to hand as much as found nature is. Just as some environments feel unsatisfactory to him, so the leaves of certain texts feel thin to him—not robust enough to bear kinship with the experience of the out of doors. (Hindu texts are among a few exceptions of course). In the same way that a mechanical lock on the river, or a bittern, might provoke a textual reverie, so might a passage from the *Gita* or a line from the *Canterbury Tales*. Key to this process, Meredith McGill has shown, was Thoreau’s “commonplace book”: a notebook in which he jotted down passages from other writers. He copied this collection, McGill notes, from works in Emerson’s library, from Emerson’s commonplace book, and from a stint studying at Harvard’s library (359).<sup>106</sup> McGill is right to point out that the constant citing of verse has a dislocating effect on the narrative, that “Thoreau uses the placelessness of the commonplace to cultivate a disjunctive...relation to the past... his narrative registers both the violence of New England’s history and the inevitability of its erasure” (358). However, this

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<sup>105</sup> This project in many ways resembles a similar one undertaken by Giambattista Vico in his *New Science*. Thoreau, like Vico, seeks the primordial language in the study of ancient poets, who used language more closely related to the world the words intend to evoke. Thoreau relies on Hindu texts for much the same purpose, as Milder observes. For a comparison with those who seek to read “in the spirit” rather than “in the letter,” see the section on Petrarch and Augustine in the preceding chapter.

<sup>106</sup> McGill observes that *A Week* contains references to and sometimes critical evaluations of Homer, Flaccus, Chaucer, and Ossian, as well as unattributed selections from “classical, medieval, Renaissance and contemporary poems; poems from high and low traditions; selections from Anacreon, Ovid, Virgil ... Spenser, Shakespeare, Francis Quarles, Sir John Denham, Felicia Hemans, and Lord Alfred Tennyson, but also Robin Hood ballads, Lovewell’s fight song, and Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765)” (359).

citing of poetry has another effect too: it adds poetry to the landscape Thoreau describes as he passes through it in his memory. As much a part of the scene as the boatmen and the reflection of the sky in the water is the verse that Thoreau pretends comes to him as he waits for the fog to lift, or the lock to fill, or the storm to pass. Thoreau uses text to render the landscape—and part of that landscape is text. After all, when Homer writes poetry, Thoreau contends, “it is as if nature spoke” (109).

Poetry, then, is a question not of artifice, but of kinship with nature. Rather than the Platonic notion (developed in the *Ion*) that the muse possesses the rhapsode in the recitation of poetry, Thoreau posits a sort of possession by nature. It is not as if the *muses* speak through Homer, but as if *nature* spoke. The generation of poetry, then, is for Thoreau a natural human process: “[As] naturally as the oak bears an acorn, and the vine a gourd, man bears a poem, either spoken or done” (108). That is, for Thoreau, the wild and the cultivated are not identified with each other, nor are the works of human *poesis* separate from nature. Rather, they interpenetrate:

In the wildest nature there is not only the material of the most cultivated life, and a sort of anticipation of the last result, but a greater refinement already than is ever attained by man. There is papyrus by the river-side, and rushes for light, and the goose only flies overhead, ages before the studios are born or letters invented, and that literature which the former suggest, and even from the first have rudely served, it may be man does not yet use them to express. Nature is prepared to welcome into her scenery the finest work of human art, for she is herself an art so cunning that the artist never appears in his work. Art is not tame, and nature is not wild, in the ordinary sense. A perfect work of man’s art would also be wild or natural in a good sense. Man tames Nature only that he may at last make her more free than even he found her, though he may never yet have succeeded. (395)

The last lines of this passage prefigure Wallace Stegner’s later observation that the only thing humans have to save nature with is culture. However, the preceding lines set out a much more tangled implication of nature and art. For Thoreau, the entanglement stems not simply from the

observation that art is based on and subject to nature. Rather, nature, too, is an artist, and “art” – “an art so cunning that the artist never appears in his work.” If the artist never appears, then the possibility stands that Nature, “herself” (as Thoreau might put it) is the artist—that Nature, too, has capacities for *poesis* outside of the human capacity to express them. Nature makes art on its own, and it makes art through producing humans and human agency. In Thoreau’s thought, Nature not only encompasses, but it also produces Art. This is why Thoreau is able to reverse *As You Like It* (II, i) and contend that the “dumb workers” of matter can teach humans—that “verily there are ‘sermons in stones and books in running streams’” (310). In much the same way, at their best the works humans produce can stand being subjected to exposure to the world—can stand being read in continuum with the world, being read out of doors. This is one of the reasons Thoreau recommends carrying some book “you have found it impossible to read at home” (383) on a journey: “It is no small recommendation when a book will stand the test of mere unobstructed sunshine and daylight” (108). Frederick Garber suggests that this interplay of human and natural *poesis* indicates Thoreau’s “awareness of the ways in which mind and nature can interlock and flow into each other” (55). While mind and nature are not identical, they have a sort of resonance—a kinship—and that kinship has implications not only for text, but for the possibilities for death and rebirth in the natural world. This is, after all, perhaps Thoreau’s chief concern in his writing: an understanding of his brother John’s death.

For Thoreau, the implication of both text and nature is clear: it is the potential for rebirth engendered by the interaction of text and world. *A Week* is not the last time Thoreau takes up the theme of the natural cycle of death and rebirth; he would take it up again at greater length in *Walden*. However, the theme of birth after death appears in several places during the course of Thoreau’s river journey: the traveler, he writes “must be born again on the road” (382), for

example. And in a passage that evokes an almost Aristotelian counter to his mentor's neo-Platonism: "We are still being born, and have as yet but a dim vision of sea and land, sun, moon, and stars, and shall not see clearly till after nine days at least" (481). That is, to Thoreau, humanity is subject to *physis*: humans are never anything more than what they are becoming (though, to be clear, this becoming comprises both matter and spirit). In a very real sense, Thoreau and his readers are "still being born." The energy behind the possibility of birth in this case is what he later will dub "wildness." As Garber observes: "[Thoreau] needed proximate wildness; or, rather, he needed to argue that wildness *was* proximate, just below the thin surface of American civilization and American skins, in Canada, Maine, and Concord" (65). Even as he re-experiences the river journey in his mind, his brother, the river, the wilderness implied by its erasure in the New England riverside, all are in a sense brought back to experience—an experience mediated by text, to be sure, but an experience nonetheless. Thoreau uses text to relate his supra-textual, geological-time view of the possibility that human artifacts will endure as anything other than the raw material Nature constantly organizes, dissolves, and reorganizes. In considering the dam at Billerica and the textile mills at Lowell, Thoreau dreams of the erasure of human cultivation: "Perchance, after a few thousands of years, if the fishes will be patient, and pass their summers elsewhere, meanwhile, nature will have levelled the Billerica dam, and the Lowell factories, and the Grass-ground River run clean again" (35). Thoreau even takes a side—even if an ironic and provisional one—against his human brethren: "I for one am with thee [the shad impeded by the dam], and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against that Billerica dam?" (40). Here, then is a textual vision of the physical rebirth of the river: the dam breaking, and the water washing away the old encrustations of text and culture—all the influence of humanity. It may be done by act of God, by human hand wielding a crowbar or through the slow

dissolution of time, but the end, as Edward Abbey observes of Glen Canyon Dam, will come. Artifice is kin to Nature, and subject to its physical processes.

This long-term, geological-time view, and its creative-destructive potential, is key to understanding the operation of the Colorado River as well, particularly with respect to the period after 1868, when John Wesley Powell became the first person to document a trip on it through the Grand Canyon.

### **The River Captured: John Wesley Powell and the Colorado**

As Thoreau's travelogue of the Concord and Merrimack shows, a river always is harnessed to some use, whether commercial, industrial, or literary.<sup>107</sup> Even since before its "discovery" in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century by the Coronado expedition, the Colorado River has served purposes both human and nonhuman. It has been subject to human creations, and, itself, a creator. Millions of years before the appearance of people, the river served to drain the newly-formed Rocky Mountains. Before the arrival of the first Europeans, the Colorado and its canyons served as a home to a succession of local tribes. Before more focused exploration, the Spaniards considered the rough territory the uncharted home of the seven cities of Cíbola, rumored to be paved with gold. With the expansion of the United States, certain politicians and developers deployed their fantasy visions of the Colorado as a navigable western river with a Pacific outlet to justify development between the Rocky Mountains and the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian, the region once known as the Great American Desert. After Powell, the river has served a dual role: as a site for the managed sublime of the country's national parks, and as a source of irrigation, power, and expansion in the western United States. This is not to say that the Canyon is solely a textual entity. To the contrary, the material flows that Powell encountered had an effect on the way he

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<sup>107</sup> Of course, some kinds of use affect the river less than others.

wrote of them, much as Thoreau's travels through an actual New England landscape colored the way in which he wrote of a nature with which he felt "kinship." Powell learns to be as comfortable in the Canyon as anyone before him had been, the most careful "reader" of the signs produced by the canyon and the surrounding territory.

Though Powell saw his journey as a scientific one in pursuit of geological and geographical information, his account of his journey owes as much to the language of the Romantic sublime—as much to poetry and text—as it does to the actual landscape through which he traveled. In the case of Powell's report on the Colorado, the river undergoes a change almost exactly the converse of the Concord and Merrimack rivers in Thoreau's work. Thoreau uses the narrative of the river journey—seeded liberally with snatches of other texts—to wrench civilized rivers back into what he considered a wilder, more primal relation with nature (Milder's "Greco-Hindu paradise"), and to suggest the possibility of wild rebirth in natural cycles. Powell's account, in contrast, is the first step in weaving one of the wildest unmapped regions in the United States into the skein of civilization. Powell's tale of his encounter with the Colorado is the preliminary stage to setting this wild river to the purposes of western development. Thoreau's language borrows from the elegy in its tacit grappling with the death of Thoreau's brother. Powell's text, on the other hand, relies heavily on the language of the Romantic sublime—depicting not a elegiac, pastoral garden, but an awe-inspiring, dyspastoral wilderness, itself capable of acts of creation. The resulting portrait in text became the foundation of the United States' new vision of the Colorado, the Grand Canyon, and the surrounding territory. It had as much or more effect on the way the nation perceived the Nature of the region as the terrain itself had on the texts describing it. In a sort of nature/culture paradox, by describing a region awe-inspiring, but unfit for human development and settlement, Powell set the Colorado River on a



path to almost total capture for use in power, agribusiness and recreation. The river becomes at once wild, and an example of Heidegger's *Bestand*, ready only to be put to use. It becomes a trickling outlet in Baja California; it becomes artichokes, electrical power, money.

Because thorough exploration of the Colorado River through its canyons was so difficult, it was easy to project wide-ranging fantasies on to the blank spots on the maps that represented the region. All of the land that Powell eventually would dub the Plateau Province was territorialized as a paradise overflowing with mineral and agricultural wealth; as violent hell of subterranean torrents, giant whirlpools, and blazing heat; as arid wasteland; and as a riparian environment more than adequate to support the western expansion and settlement of the United States. This Plateau Province extends approximately from Colorado's western slope to the east rim of the Great Basin in Utah, and from the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel to the Painted Desert. Except for the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel, the limits of the region are blurry. Wallace Stegner describes the province as "an unknown and forbidding island across two thirds of the state of Utah and down into Arizona, between what would one day be Highway 30 and what would be Highway 66, or roughly between the line of the Union Pacific and that of the Santa Fe" (120). Stegner notes that the region traces a Mesozoic coastline, during which the Wasatch Range, a portion of Arizona, and the entire Great Basin were ocean. Stegner's geological description is poetic, but accurate:

[H]ere the earth has a slow, regular pulse. It rose and fell for millions of years under the Carboniferous, Permian, Triassic oceans, under Cretaceous seas, under the fresh-water lakes of the Eocene, before it was heaved up and exposed to rain and frost and running water and the sandblast winds. (119)

The first Europeans to see the canyon arrived as part of a 1540 expedition led by a Castilian noble, Franciso Vásquez de Coronado. He was seeking one of the Seven Cities of Cíbola, which folktales referred to as paradises overflowing with gold and gems (and, conveniently for many of the tribes with whom the Spanish had contact, quite a good distance away in the wilderness).

One of the cities was said to be located next to a great river, and Coronado dispatched one of his lieutenants, García López de Cárdenas, to find this great river and follow it to the city. With the help of Hopi guides, López found the Colorado—from his vantage point on what is now known as the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, several thousand feet up from the riverbed. López’s men made a series of foolhardy attempts to descend to the water, and nearly died of thirst. This first European attempt to explore the canyon ended in failure—and court-martial for López – as the viceroy was very put out by the soldiers’ incompetence.<sup>108</sup>

Though the region remained uncharted for centuries afterward, it was not entirely unexplored. Today’s maps of the terrain are a litany of the area’s first explorers. Soldier, explorer, and future U.S. Senator John. C. Frémont had crossed the region in 1844, 1848 and 1853; John Gunnison also explored it in 1853, when he was ambushed and killed by Pahvant Utes. Edward L. Berthoud surveyed part of the region for a railroad line in 1861, and President Lincoln had sent the Third California Infantry to the region from time to time during the 60s to keep Brigham Young’s burgeoning Mormon lands from getting any grand ideas about challenging United States power in the region. But these were only quick journeys—flights across the territory—outrunning angry Navajo, Paiute and Apache, avoiding death by thirst or hunger. No one had taken the time to map it, to territorialize the region by means of a map and its grid. Knowledge of the Canyon remained, in Wallace Stegner’s assessment, “a mixture of fact, fantasy and folklore” (122), and that mixture proved fertile for the hopes and imaginations of ambitious or curious men, con-men and scientists—or strange mixtures of all four. One such con artist was Colorado’s first territorial governor, William Gilpin, who “saw the West through a

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<sup>108</sup> López continues to be credited as the first European to have seen the canyon, but many historians hold that two other men, Francisco de Ulloa and Fernando de Alarcón, separately, probably visited first—within 12 months of López’s trip.

blaze of mystical fervor... and his conception of its resources and its future as a home for millions was as grandiose as his rhetoric, as unlimited as his faith, as splendid as his capacity for inaccuracy” (2). Gilpin denied any aridity to the lands west of the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian. They were “no desert, nor even a semi-desert, but a pastoral Canaan” (3). Against all empirical evidence, Gilpin saw limitless, easy agriculture, and more than enough water for all who wished to settle in the west. Gilpin was the author of works with titles like: *The Central Gold Region*, *The Mission of the North American People*, and *The Cosmopolitan Railway*, and Marc Reisner notes (2) that he had received the gospel of Manifest Destiny from the mouth of Sen. Thomas H. Benton, his mentor.<sup>109</sup> The Homestead Act of 1862 granted ownership of 160-acre (“quarter section”) parcels to those who could cultivate them, and it was in the interests of many in business and government that as much of it be developed as possible. “The enormous gush of humanity pouring into a region still marked on some maps as the Great American Desert was encouraged by wishful thinking, by salesmanship, that most American of motivating forces, and, most of all, by natural caprice,” Reisner writes (35).<sup>110</sup>

As important as the myth of easily cultivable land was the fantasy of the navigable western river—the Rocky Mountain equivalent of the Mississippi—that would allow easy transportation of goods from the Pacific into the western territories. Gilpin was as fervent a proponent of such “fact” as he was about the agricultural Canaan that awaited settlers in the region not long before referred to as the “Great American Desert.” As Stegner explains: “It would be a valuable and exciting matter if a practicable water route split the plateau country in two and gave easy access to the Pacific. Therefore, it existed, in spite of logic and topography

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<sup>109</sup> Also, the great-uncle of the painter.

<sup>110</sup> After 1865, freakishly huge rainfall in the region convinced many settlers that for some reason they could not explain “Rain follows the plow.” See Reisner and Stegner.

and triply demonstrated fact” (49). An “explorer” who styled himself “Captain” Sam Adams claimed to have explored the river thoroughly, and assured anyone who would listen that he had discovered an easily navigable waterway from Colorado to the Gulf of California. “Adams was over that shadow line which divides the merely extravagant from the lunatic,” Stegner writes. That “easy voyage” involved scores of stiff rapids just to reach the mouth of the Dolores River. “[A]nd then would have come almost five hundred miles of river rough enough to daunt even the witless” (83).<sup>111</sup> This was the kind of tale that overlay the actual terrain of the canyon until Aug. 30, 1869, when Powell’s expedition reached the Grand Wash Cliffs (now submerged under Lake Mead) with six men and two boats. It was a mesh of fantasy and speculation that had almost nothing to do with the experience the canyon and surrounding land actually offered.

In his 1875 account, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and its Canyons*, Powell describes the layer of fable stretched over the region as a wilderness alternately and at once desolate and overpowering.<sup>112</sup> The Colorado River is the site of the wilderness pastoral—the dyspastoral—depicting a natural scene, wild and utterly unfit for human habitation:

[E]nough had been seen in earlier days to foment rumor, and many wonderful stories were told in the hunter’s cabin and the prospector’s camp—stories of parties entering the gorge in boats and being carried down with fearful velocity into whirlpools where all were overwhelmed in the abyss of waters, and stories of underground passages for the great river into which boats had passed never to be seen again. It was currently believed that the river was lost under the rocks for several hundred miles... and there were stories current of parties wandering on the brink of the canyon and vainly endeavoring to reach the waters below, and perishing of thirst at last in sight of the river which was roaring its mockery into their dying ears. (35)

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<sup>111</sup> James White, a trapper, also claimed to have run part of the canyon in 1867. According to Stegner, “White had floated out into the edge of civilization at Callville on Sept. 8 1867, half naked, blackened with sun, starving and demented, on a cobbled raft” (33).

<sup>112</sup> Powell made two expeditions down the Colorado River, in 1869 and again in 1871, with another team. He combines his findings from both of the trips into his 1875 account.

Powell had traveled enough in the region to recognize the pure fantasy of Gilpin's agricultural Canaan—and as a good amateur scientist, he was willing to test the theory of the navigable western river. Even the local Chivwits tribe had subjected the canyon territory to myths of death and paradise. Powell recounts a story told him by a Chivwits chief about the creation of the canyon. An ancient chief, an ancestral hero of the tribe, was mourning his deceased wife so loudly and long that he irritated Tavwoats, one of the Indian gods. To get some peace, the god told the man that his wife was in a better land, and offered to show it to him if he would only stop his sobbing. The man agreed, and the god made a trail through the mountains to the paradise where the chief's wife was. When they returned, Tavwoats forced the chief to promise never to tell anyone of the trail, and then rolled a ferocious river into the gorge to prevent anyone ever finding the trail. Powell's expedition, however, would wrench the canyon from these networks of meaning where it had been trapped for centuries. "There was a thick crust of fable over this region," Stegner writes. "And as the country was lifted slowly into knowledge the layers of fable lifted with it, bending upward at the flanks like sedimentary strata along the axis of a great earth flexure" (122).

The team of men who set out from Green River with Powell on May 24, 1869 was no finely-tuned instrument of scientific investigation.<sup>113</sup> Nor was it a tightly-drilled squad of military precision as Powell had come to know them during his stint as a U.S. Army officer during the Civil War. The expedition included a Scottish boy not yet out of his teens (Andrew Hall), a cook wanted for some unspecified offense in Missouri (Bill Hawkins), an English thrill-seeker (Frank Goodman), a printer turned mountain man (O.G. Howland), the "silent, moody and

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<sup>113</sup> Specifically, the group set out at a crossroads of wilderness and civilization: where the Union Pacific railroad crosses the Green River. It enabled Powell to have his four boats shipped from Chicago.

sarcastic” Capt. William Powell (Wesley Powell’s brother), and a depressed U.S. Army Lieutenant, George Bradley. Powell, who had lost his right arm at Shiloh, purposed to make an expedition that required near-constant paddling, and frequent climbing and scrambling over rocks.<sup>114</sup> Not one of the men was a professional scientist, and only one of them was a professional guide: J. C. Sumner, who once had crossed the Rockies in midwinter on snowshoes. This group was, in Deleuze’s parlance, a multiplicity, a “nonsubjectified machinic assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones” (353). That is, because there was no military discipline, the size and deployment of the group changed often during the expedition. And because there were no specialists, the Powell expedition was endowed with the peculiar power to connect and adapt to internal and external conditions. All could perform the kind of minimal science the expedition required, for example. All could cook. All could hunt. All (eventually) could pilot the boats. While such a loose organization conferred advantages in the Canyon, it also exacted a different sort of authority from Powell than the kind he was accustomed to exercising as a military officer. His role fits very nicely with Deleuze’s discussion of Pierre Clastre’s study of the nomadic chief who “has no instituted weapon other than his prestige, no other means of persuasion, no other rule than his sense of the group’s desires. The chief is more like a leader or a star than a man of power and is always in danger of being abandoned by his people” (357). In fact, Powell’s expedition was abandoned twice during its course. Goodman left the journey at the Uinta Reservation at the junction of the Green and White rivers, telling the group he had experienced quite enough adventure for his tastes.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> The Utes and Shoshones later would dub Powell *Ka’purats*: “arm-off.” The Chivwits applied the name to him as well.

<sup>115</sup> He and O.G. Howland had wrecked their 21-foot oak boat in the first major rapids, and Goodman nearly drowned. Sumner saved them—and a three-gallon cask of whiskey.

On another occasion, in late August, the group found itself above what appeared to be a hideous set of rapids, as the river turned again to the south and into the gneiss that always signaled danger and difficulty for the group. The expedition was down to its last sack of dried apples, (though it had plenty of coffee) and the Howland brothers and Bill Dunn told Powell that they would not run the rapids with the group. To continue in the canyon would be certain death, they contended. Instead they would set out on foot for the nearest Mormon settlement, about 75 miles away. Powell tried to convince O.G. Howland that the 80 or so river miles to the mouth of the Virgin River were surer and quicker than chancing an overland journey in the desert, with water supplies and terrain uncertain. He failed. The next morning, Aug. 28, not only could Powell not force the dissenters to stay, the Howlands and Dunn tried to persuade Powell to leave with them:

For the last time they entreat us not to go on, and tell us that it is madness to set out in this place; that we can never get safely through it; and, further, that the river turns again to the south into the granite, and a few miles of such rapids will exhaust our entire stock of rations, and then it will be too late to climb out. Some tears are shed; it is rather a solemn parting; each party thinks the other is taking the dangerous course. (280-1)

According to Powell's account, he later learned from a Chivwits chief that his warriors, mistaking expedition's men for miners who had killed a Chivwits woman (and, understandably, disbelieving their account of Canyon exploration), had ambushed and killed them.<sup>116</sup> Those men were the last victims of the old mythical Canyon—of impassable hell guarding unattainable paradise. After all, if the Canyon was impassable, then the men encountered there must have been up to no good. Dunn and the Howlands were, in Stegner's assessment, "victims of an

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<sup>116</sup> In his work *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2001), Jon Krakauer notes that some of the men wanted for the Mountain Meadows Massacre were hiding from federal authorities in the area. He suggests that these men were likely to be paranoid about the presence of federal scouts, and more capable than peaceful, poorly-equipped Chivwits of overpowering armed, seasoned mountain men. He explains the chief's account by suggesting that Powell's translator, Jacob Hamblin, had motive to obscure the truth.

Indian misunderstanding and their own miscalculation of the algebra of chance” (112). Once the rest of the expedition emerged from the Canyon, the story of running a canyon expedition would no longer be the absurdity so many once had thought. As it so often happened, Powell’s calculations were correct. The skill the group had honed by months paddling difficult rapids enabled the remaining members of the group to shoot the rapids with comparative ease. According to Stegner, Powell’s journal from the day is typically laconic: “Boys left us. Ran rapid. Made camp on left bank. Camp 44” (108).

If Powell was terse in the daily account he recorded on long, brown strips of paper and later stitched into books with shoe leather, in his 1875 description of the journey he waxes poetic. Though in his preface he describes his main intent in the expedition as scientific—and claims that he never intended to write an account of the trip—Powell employs self-consciously literary, occasionally overwrought, language informed by the romantic literature of his time. Much of his account constitutes an apt example of Morton’s “ecomimesis”:

The wonders of the Grand Canyon cannot be adequately represented in symbols of speech, nor by speech itself. The resources of the graphic art are taxed beyond their powers in attempting to portray its features. Language and illustration combined must fail. The elements that unite to make the Grand Canyon the most sublime in nature are multifarious and exceedingly diverse. The Cyclopean forms which result from the sculpture of tempests through ages too long for man to compute, are wrought into endless details, to describe which would be a task equal in magnitude to that of describing the stars of the heavens or the multitudinous beauties of the forest with its traceries of foliage presented by oak and pine and poplar, by beech and linden and hawthorn, by tulip and lily and rose, by fern and moss and lichen. Besides the elements of form there are elements of color; for here the colors of the heavens are rivaled by the colors of the rocks. The rainbow is not more replete with hues. But form and color do not exhaust all the divine qualities of the Grand Canyon. It is the land of music. The river thunders in perpetual roar, swelling in floods of music when the storm gods play upon the rocks and fading away in soft and low murmurs when the infinite blue of heaven is unveiled. With the melody of the great tide rising and falling, swelling and vanishing forever, other melodies are heard in the gorges of the lateral canyons, while the waters plunge in the rapids among the rocks or leap in great cataracts. Thus the Grand Canyon is a land of song. Mountains of music swell in the rivers, hills of music billow in the creeks, and meadows of music murmur in the rills that ripple over the rocks. Altogether it is a



symphony of multitudinous melodies. All this is the music of waters. The adamant foundations of the earth have been wrought into a sublime harp, upon which the clouds of the heavens play with mighty tempests or gentle showers. (397)

This rapturous description comes from the last chapter of Powell's account, in which he attempts to sum up the experience of venturing through the Canyon by boat. Whether intentionally or not, Powell has touched on many of the tropes of the wilderness pastoral: the presence of reader and text in the landscape described, the evocation of nature itself as artist, and the paradise of beauty too rugged, too pristine, for humans to inhabit.

This passage is a clear ecomimetic attempt—an effort to evoke the terrain that Powell and his men actually experience. Powell deploys art—and the language of art—to enable his readers to see Nature. However, Powell acknowledges at the outset that his efforts cannot succeed: “[l]anguage and illustration combined must fail.” Instead, he must borrow language that can only be inadequate to convey his memories. What results is text as reliant on contemporary strains of the beautiful and sublime as it is on the actual experiences Powell attempts to recount. (After all, the comic or the lyric hardly suffice for such an adventure.) However, unlike the ecomimeticist who, Morton claims, wants readers “to love nature” (152), Powell, like Thoreau, wants his readers to *see* the canyon and the river. The only way to do that, Powell believes, is to pass through the canyon on the water. Powell's account unfolds in the present tense, implicating the reader in the exploration of the river as it occurs in text. The immediacy is a necessary illusion: “You cannot see the Grand Canyon in one view, as if it were a changeless spectacle from which a curtain might be lifted,” he writes. “But to see it you have to toil from month to month through its labyrinths” (397). As he cannot physically bring the reader along, Powell can only provide a text that enables the reader to envision, through art, the natural terrain he experiences.

In his description of the canyon Powell is keenly aware of the relations between elements of nature operating in concert, making Nature into an artist, even as he uses art to describe nature. That is, in portraying nature as an artist, he is able to convey to his readers the relations between sets of linked, natural, rates of change. In the canyon, art and nature are intermixed, tangled, entwined inseparably—even as Powell attempts to convey that tangle in his own text. “[T]he wandering clouds, the tempest-bearing clouds, with mighty power and with wonderful skill, carve out valley and canyons and fashion hills and cliffs and mountains. The clouds are the artists sublime” (393). “Tempests” are sculptors that create “Cyclopean forms,” on a scale of geological time “too long for man to compute,” for example. In this case, Powell personifies the action of wind and water, pressure and temperature, as a sculptor working on the rock of the landscape. In a similar manner, Powell also compares the actions of nature to those of a painter concerned with “elements of form” and color. As natural differentials carve out uncanny sculptures from the surrounding rock strata, so they also deploy form and color like a painter, able to compose the sort of landscape that conveys an echo of the awe the original might engender in those who encounter it physically. Most extended is Powell’s depiction of the conjunction of river and canyon as at once instrument and musician—“a land of music,” he terms it. The river roars when it storms, whispers when it is clear, and is accompanied by the melodies of the “great tide” rising and falling. Powell makes of the canyon his version of the Aeolian harp of romantic poetry, sensitive and subject to the action of Nature, which plays upon it. He describes however, not an Aeolian harp, fit for the romantic pastoral dream of a nature allied with humans, but a sort of Tritonian/Vulcanian symphony that threatens to overwhelm the senses.<sup>117</sup> Humans are not the only artists in the canyon, Powell demonstrates. Material flows,

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<sup>117</sup> The process is similar to that involving the head of Orpheus, reduced to matter, to musical

too, are creative.<sup>118</sup> He depicts the canyon as an ongoing work of art, unfolding moment by moment, daily, over years too numerous for humans to count, and according to its own “will.”

Powell and his men became careful and astute critics and students of this natural art, gradually learning what all river boaters learn: not to fight the river but to harness it, to allow it to carry one where the best path is, to use its strength to augment one’s own. The team learned to “read” the hydraulics of the river as well as they could read maps or letters. Coming upon a tricky stretch of river Aug 14, Powell observed: “Heretofore hard rocks have given us bad river;<sup>119</sup> soft rocks, smooth water; and a series of rocks harder than any we have experienced sets in” (248). Powell even learned to read the wind, and how it reacted with water and rock and temperature: “The wind annoys us much to-day. The water, rough by reason of the rapids, is made more so by head gales. Wherever a great face of rocks has a southern exposure, the rarified air rises and the wind rushes in below, either up or down the canyon, or both, causing local currents” (191). Powell learned quickly that 12 hours of travel in the canyon could mean 35 miles of progress, or less than a mile, depending on the terrain. The group learned to accept and use whatever the canyon gave them.<sup>120</sup> Powell does not care that his readers love the Canyon. He wants them to see it, and to be awed by it. His language is an effort to express the scale of the canyon and the power of the river. When Powell describes rapids, he does more than simply mark their location and architecture. He describes the relation between rock and water, between speed and turbulence. He recounts the rapid’s history: “what a conflict of water and fire!” he

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instrument, on which Nature plays in the form of river and waves.

<sup>118</sup> Though, clearly, Powell is employing a metaphor (and a well-used one) here, I do not believe he intended this passage to be taken purely metaphorically.

<sup>119</sup> [Footnote mine] Powell is referring to the Precambrian granite which, when exposed, generally indicates enormous rapids on the Colorado.

<sup>120</sup> Not only on the water. In one memorable scouting episode, Powell found himself trapped on a narrow ledge—unable to advance or to return to his last hold. Bradley rescued Powell by using his “drawers” as a top rope.

describes at Lava Falls—the group’s last big rapid. ”Just imagine a river of molten rock running down into a river of melted snow. What a seething and boiling of the waters; what clouds of steam rolled into the heavens!” (274).

Powell reserves his plainest language to make what was at the time his most dramatic flourish: the latitude and longitude of the sources of the Colorado, Grand and Green rivers, all of which had been hidden and speculative for centuries. “The mouth of the Colorado is in latitude 31°53’ and longitude 115°. The source of the Grand River is in latitude 40° 17’ and longitude 105° 43’ approximately. The source of the Green River is in latitude 43° 15’ and longitude 109° 54’ approximately” (17). As Stegner observes, Powell’s account corrected the official federal map, which placed the mouth of the San Juan “probably 100” miles below the junction of Green and Grand (a Mormon map had it 50 miles below), although the river’s course was really much further west (88). Powell marked miles, distance, confluences—finally confirming, for example, that the Colorado River is formed by the junction of the Grand and the Green.<sup>121</sup> Simply by following the river through the Canyon, Powell destroyed part of the old narrative about what the Canyon was supposed to be. The old maps simply did not match up with the territory, any more than did the old stories about what one would find in the canyon. Powell collected data as often as he could and preserved it as best he could (he was not entirely successful on his first run). Not only did his team establish the sextant readings and tables that would fix the canyon on the maps, the team members gave the maps new names for the canyons and rapids they passed: Canyon of Lodore (named after a Scottish ballad Goodman recalled), Horseshoe Bend, Bright Angel Creek, Desolation Canyon, Vesey’s Paradise, Cataract Canyon, Glen Canyon.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The Grand River is now known as the Colorado, essentially marooning, but also explaining the origin of such Colorado city names as Grand Junction, by which the Colorado River flows.

<sup>122</sup> As noted, Glen Canyon is now submerged by the Glen Canyon Dam. In a twist of irony, Lake

These names are in keeping with the romantic (their scientific endeavors notwithstanding) bent of Powell and his men. However, Powell was well aware that the people for whom he was writing his 1875 account were not scientists, or at any rate, not exclusively scientists. They constituted a general audience, familiar with the language of the romantic sublime in nature as set out in poetry and prose, but more familiar physically with urban environments than wilderness or even rural ones. For that reason, Powell occasionally resorts to urban standards to evoke the scale of the canyon. In describing the height of its walls, for example:

Stand on the south steps of the Treasury building in Washington and look down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol; measure this distance overhead, and imagine cliffs to extend to that altitude, and you will understand what is meant; or stand at Canal Street in New York and look up Broadway to Grace Church, and you have about the distance. (251)

Powell was savvy to describe the canyon in terms of the political center in Washington and the financial center in New York. Those concentrations of power would be linked tightly to the canyon country in very short order. Much of what Powell documented should have thwarted most dreams of western expansion and development. There was, for example, no easily navigable route from the Green River to the Gulf of California, and irrigating much of the land in the west to make it suitable for farming was going to be an expensive proposition—if it could be done at all. However, to a government bent on settling the west, and corporations determined to expand markets and sources of income, Powell's findings mattered little. As Reisner observes: "In the West, of course, where water, is concerned, logic and reason have never figured prominently in the scheme of things" (14). According to Reisner, the Land Office officials in Washington ignored the arid climate conditions Powell reported based on his geological

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Powell now drowns the canyon Powell first explored. Longtime western boaters (like Edward Abbey) call it "Lake Foul."

observations. They ignored the limiting scarcity of water. “Their job, as they perceived it, was to fill little squares with people” (42). This process is, as Deleuze and Guattari conceive it, “One of the fundamental tasks of the State” (385). As Bonta and Protevi explain:

Striated space is “land” (*terre*): constituted by the overcoding of territories under the signifying regime and the State apparatus (ATP 440-1). Land refers exclusively to striated space, and that is terrain that can be owned, held as stock, distributed, rented, made to produce and taxed. Land can be gridded, distributed, classified and categorized without even being physically experienced, and a striking example of this is the township-and-range system of the US that imparted striated space to as vast part of the North American continent ahead of actual settler occupation. (80)

The township and range system has its roots in a grid laid out by Thomas Jefferson as an organizing principle to comprise unexplored areas the United States could claim as territory. The intent was to prepare the land for settling, so that it might be made to work, to generate a profit, and to expand the power and provenance of the State. As far as the State is concerned, first comes the striation; then come the inhabitants. Then, as Reisner describes it, come “Speculation. Water monopoly. Land monopoly. Erosion. Corruption. Catastrophe”—what Powell was convinced would be “the fruits of a western land policy based on wishful thinking, willfulness, and lousy science” (43). Having briefly attempted to make map match terrain, the function of State began to distort the map again.

Powell in his 1870 *Survey of the Arid Lands of the West*, contends that the township and range system, while reasonable in the East, where there is a great deal of rainfall, makes no sense in the West, where scarcity is the norm. He recommends cooperative irrigation where feasible, and organizing western development around watersheds.<sup>123</sup> However, after the West returned to its normal drought cycles, “The result was a half-century rampage of dam-building and irrigation

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<sup>123</sup> Powell worked chiefly in government service after his expeditions. He served as director of the U.S. Geological Survey from 1881-1894. Also, many of the federal agencies familiar to those who travel in western backcountry—the National Park Service, the Geodetic Survey, the Weather Bureau, among others—are traceable to Powell’s influence.

development which, in all probability, went far beyond anything Powell would have liked,” writes Reisner (51). Impounded in reservoirs behind a series of dams, the Colorado provides more than half of the water supply for Los Angeles, San Diego, and Phoenix. It lights Las Vegas, and grows much of the supply of winter vegetables in the U.S.. A bare trickle reaches the dried up delta at the head of the Gulf of California, Reisner writes.<sup>124</sup> “To its preeminent impounder, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, it is the perfection of an ideal” (121). In his collection *Encounters with the Archdruid*, John McPhee relates a conversation he had with longtime Board of Reclamation Commissioner Floyd E. Dominy, who defends the Glen Canyon Dam and the creation of Lake Powell: “Too many people think of environment simply as untrammelled nature ... Preservation groups claim we destroyed this area because we made it accessible to man. Six hundred thousand people a year use that lake now” (171). Fifty years after Powell, the Hoover Dam first regulated the Colorado’s flow for purposes of power and irrigation. It took less than 100 days for Powell to run the Canyon. Since then, energy interests in the West have spent nearly 150 years attempting to control the canyon flows. To Dominy, it was a vast improvement: “The unregulated Colorado was a son of a bitch. It wasn’t any good. It was either in flood or in trickle” (173). In exploring and describing the last wild space on the map in the lower 48 states, Powell enabled the U.S. to go about reining in the Colorado River. Powell’s romantic language has become part of the narrative of the settling of the west: brave men in daring expeditions against terrifying odds. And his account continues to describe the river as it is used for recreation in the Grand Canyon, but the language masks, yet again, the material conditions of the Colorado: its existence as an appendage to development in the west.

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<sup>124</sup> In Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, Chris McCandless attempts to kayak the Colorado to its outlet in the Gulf of California. He is stymied by the shallow canals and locks across the Mexican border.

## River and Elegy

As rivers so frequently function as symbols for time, as signs of passage from life to death, an elegiac tone in writing of rivers is perhaps not especially surprising. Edward Abbey, as noted earlier, was particularly bitter about the Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado:

The philosophers and the theologians have agreed, for three thousand years, that the perfect is immutable—that which cannot alter and cannot ever be altered. They were wrong. We were wrong. Glen Canyon was destroyed. Everything changes, and nothing is more vulnerable than the beautiful. (231)

The principle of change is perhaps the most important element of any river—from moment to moment it shifts: now flooding, now ebbing, now swiftly wearing away its bed and gradually spreading its banks, meandering and slowing, as Thoreau describes the Concord. In addressing the death of his brother by revisiting their trip in 1839, interspersing decontextualized snatches of poetry, meditating on Hindu literature, Thoreau comes to understand that the rivers he traveled and now recalls constantly are dying and being born again. As Ning Yu observes: “Thoreau has ultimate faith in the regenerating power of nature, and for him water will always run and grass will always grow” (314). Thoreau shows the Merrimack and its environs in slow time:

[A]ll things seemed with us to flow; the shore itself, and the distant cliffs, were dissolved by the undiluted air. The hardest material seemed to obey the same law with the most fluid, and so indeed in the long run it does. Trees were but rivers of sap and woody fibre, flowing from the atmosphere, and emptying into the earth by their trunks, as their roots flowed upward to the surface. And in the heavens there were rivers of stars, and milky ways, already beginning to gleam and ripple over our heads. There were rivers of rock on the surface of the earth, and rivers of ore in its bowels, and our thoughts flowed and circulated, and this portion of time was but the current hour. (414)

Thoreau recognizes, at least in part, that it is in the nature of the universe, of all things that seem stable, to flow—especially over the course of time. As Powell indicates, even what seems to be solid rock flows when set against geological time. Even in the decade—a vanishingly short time, geologically speaking—between the Thoreaus’ trip and Henry’s account of it, the river has



changed, has become less an instrument of commerce: “Since our voyage the railroad on the bank has been extended and there is now but little boating on the Merrimack. All kinds of produce and stores were formerly conveyed by water, but now nothing is carried up the stream, and almost wood and bricks alone are carried down, and these are also carried on the railroad” (264). “Thoreau,” Yu writes, “depicted the interaction among the cultural landscapes only to show that nature had the final say in the shaping of land” (311, Nt. 11).

In this sense, any “accommodation” between humans and nature, any attempt to subject nature to art or civilization, is provisional at best. Such efforts have no more claim to timelessness in the enormous flow of ages than does a dam, a tree, a flower, a fruit fly. Humans can only save nature for themselves with culture, with our pastoral designs, but these designs are no more permanent than any other set of relations in nature. Humans may try to control Nature—in art and engineering—but in the very long view, these efforts are doomed to failure. The natural dynamic relations of flowing matter (as shown in rivers) work to undermine and destroy the channels and dams of the State. Deleuze notes that the State exercises *pouvoir* as transcendent control over relations like rivers only in the very short term, geologically speaking. Given enough time, rivers destroy dams. Given even more time, seas cover mountains. Given still more time, those seas deposit limestone, and in further eons still those seas may recede and the rivers return to form yet another canyon country.

Or as Abbey expresses it: “Nature always bats last.”

## Chapter Four

### Animal Masters: *The Jungle Books* and *The Case of the Animals Versus Man*

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee;  
or ask the birds, and they shall tell thee;  
or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee:  
and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee.

*Job 12: 7-10*

In fables, animals show humans how to act like humans—and they do this by acting like animals. Or, rather, they do this by acting as stylized animals, according to textual traditions: what heirs to a particular cultural tradition “know” animals to be like. In many western cultures, for example, the owl must be wise, the mouse timid, and the fox clever. The goal in such texts is not to convey biological accuracy or ecological fidelity, but to use long-established scripts depicting animal behavior to serve as guides for the possible actions of humans. Depicted this way, animals serve as both model and warning. The animal indicates both what the human is not, and what the human is capable of becoming—either noble or base. Noble humans emulate the worthy aspects of animals worthy of respect. On the other hand, people often use bestial terms to nullify the humanity of those deemed unworthy of respect, empathy or kinship. To be cast as a lion is admirable; to be derided as vermin frequently is an early indicator of persecution and oppression—a prelude to genocide. In either case, the boundary between human and animal blurs. One is to be like some animals, and unlike others, to be a good human. In much the same way that the wilderness marks the limits of civilization, so the animal marks the limits of the human. However, as in the case of similar evidently firm binary oppositions, the lines between mind and world, human and nature, are not as clear as they might seem.

Several scholars have come to conclude that the distinction between animal and human has become at once so clumsy and pernicious that it should be abandoned altogether. For example, Matthew Calarco maintains that to group such an astonishing array of life under the category “animal” serves only to justify the exploitation of the nonhuman—in much the same way that “essentialism in feminism, queer theory, and race studies” frequently serves to justify marginalizing specific individuals relegated to those categories. In recent efforts in “animal studies,” Calarco notes, scholars have attempted “to track the ways in which the concept of ‘animality’ functions to demarcate humans clearly from animals and establish homogeneities among what appear to be radically different forms of animal life” (3). Other scholars, such as Donna Haraway, have noted the process by which the domains of machine, human, and animal have blended to form the concept of a new entity, the cyborg. “By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached,” she writes (1991, 151). This realm of animal studies takes as its object the collapse of the categories of human and animal, either into a new conceptual entity, as Haraway contends, or into what appears to be a new category under a revised sign of nature, as Calarco suggests. In the brief discussion of recent theory in animal studies that follows, this work proceeds with maintaining a division between animal and human, even as it explores the way that these separate textual and natural entities are entangled with one another. The animal, as any other terrain, must be read both in text and in nature.

To that end, this chapter considers two texts, separated by culture, language, geography, and time, yet equally indebted to the tradition of the animal fable. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century tale *The Case of the Animals Versus Man before the King of the Jinn*, by the Basran secret society the

*Ikhwân al-Safâ' wa-Khullân al-Wafâ'* (the Brethren of Purity),<sup>125</sup> animals sue humanity for enslaving and mistreating them, and they ask the king of the jinn for justice. The animals in this fable recognize a law that binds both human and animal, and they seek to exert their rights under it, bringing its power to bear on humanity. The question of animals and law also figures prominently in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books*.<sup>126</sup> In a series of fables, Kipling depicts the education of a human orphan raised by a team comprising wolves, a bear, a panther, and a snake (among others). Other scholars have correctly and adroitly read the work as a manual for educating young imperialists. However, this study focuses specifically on the role of the animals as educators and bearers of law in the jungle. The law limits Mowgli as much as it protects him, and it may be that Kipling, certainly a great advocate of British colonialism, inadvertently undercuts his messages in depicting Mowgli's kinship with the animals. This chapter begins with a discussion of recent debates in animal (or "animality," as some scholars dub it) studies. It then takes up the question of the *Jungle Books* before turning to *The Case of the Animals versus Man*. Throughout, this study considers the way in which the animal becomes an agent of law—the way in which the depiction of the Natural and nonhuman serves to bind the human in text—in *ethos*.

### **The End of "Animal" and "Human"**

The split between human and animal, according to some scholars, occurred at approximately the same time as the split between human and nature. This division is generally placed in the seventeenth century, and the definitive textual moment to the *cogito* of Descartes's

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<sup>125</sup> L.E. Goodman, whose translation of the fable appears here, renders the name: "The Pure (or Sincere) Brethren and True (or Loyal) Friends" (35). The name is drawn from a story contained in the collection of animal fables *Kalila wa-Dimna*, whose component tales were drawn from the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*. The Brethren, their inspiration, and their perspective are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>126</sup> The first set of stories was published as *The Jungle Book* in 1894. A sequel followed in 1895. The plural *Jungle Books* is used in this chapter to refer to the two collections containing the Mowgli stories. When other writers use the singular, it appears unchanged.

*Meditations*. The *cogito*, contends Laurie Shannon, is at once a proclamation of existence and a species definition. Humans became thinking creatures “alone equipped with a rational soul,” while nonhuman life would be categorized with mechanical (in this category, instinctual) nature: “To put it in the broadest terms: before the *cogito*, there was no such thing as ‘the animal.’ There were creatures, there were brutes and there were beasts. There were fish and fowl. There were living things” (474). Humans, Shannon writes, figured in the category of living things—following Aristotle, all animals were made of the same matter, and all had souls. Though Shannon is correct in her assessment of the category of animal in Aristotle, she dates the division between human and animal far too late. The simple absence of a blanket, collective term such as “animal” is not evidence that a conceptual split between humanity and other forms of life did not exist. As early as *Genesis* and *Gilgamesh*, the distinction between human and animal was evident.<sup>127</sup> The important point Shannon makes, however, depends on the notion of animal as a collective category to encompass all living creatures which are not human and not plants. That is, one should guard against essentializing the animal, turning it into a category that justifies its mistreatment. The main approaches to the question of the animal take three forms. The first is that the category of animal is multiple, and in its illusory unity masks a diverse array of capacities among species placed in the category. The second is that the category of the animal serves mainly to delineate the characteristics of the proper human, that is: to mark where humans cease to be human in their behavior. Last, the categories of animal and human are blurred to such a degree that it is utterly inaccurate folly to speak of them as separate.

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<sup>127</sup> Even the present chapter, for example, considers a 10<sup>th</sup> century work which recognizes a division—and tension—between man and animal, even while it acknowledges that the category “animal” encompasses many types.

As an antidote to the generalizing, essentializing class of “animal,” some scholars have proposed shattering the category into a vast pack of constituent parts. After all, the term itself masks a vast kingdom of species from the microscopic to the colossal, from the programmed (viruses, for example, whose membership in the kingdom is hotly contested), to the creative (any number of apes, and dolphins, for example, though there are others). For quite a long time, however the human tendency has been to make all animals the same. As Rosi Braidotti writes: “Since antiquity, animals have constituted a sort of zooproletariat” (528). The term is amusing but also apt, as it implies facelessness in a mass of undifferentiated entities, creating the illusion of one identical mass. Also, it highlights the history of oppression linked to defining animals (and other humans) as part of an undifferentiated mass: “herds” both human and animal share a similar fate. A more helpful means of categorizing the animal, Braidotti suggests, would take place along the lines that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari set out in *A Thousand Plateaus*: not “according to scientific taxonomies, nor ... interpreted metaphorically” (528). Instead, the animal should be seen as “a cluster of capabilities.”

This careful multiplicity of the animal is a key theme of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus*, in which the two contend that “[e]very animal is fundamentally a band, a pack” (239). That is, even among kinds of animal, one should speak properly of a becoming animal, a passing through of various states, various frames of possibility. A wolf is always a pack, and in “becoming-wolf” humans, too, become multiple. “A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity” (239). Deleuze and Guattari posit three categories of animal. The first comprises “individuated animals, family pets.”<sup>128</sup> The second includes: “genus, classification, or State animals: animals as they are treated in the great divine

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<sup>128</sup> “[A]nyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool,” they remark (emphasis in original).

myths.” Last, are “pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming” (240). Any animal, Deleuze and Guattari write, can at any time become any of the three kinds of animal—depending on its set of relations and affects, its potentials. In becoming-animal, humans, too, can become any of the three. Their work on this topic challenges those who conceive of the animal to cease considering it a stable unity, but rather as a set of changing states in which its capabilities shift from moment to moment. A more fruitful way of conceiving the animal, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is to abandon structural taxonomy in favor of maps of potentials. Animals should be described, in this respect, not by what structures they share at a given moment with other kinds of animals, but by the sort of activity the animal is capable of: “[a] racehorse is more different from a workhorse than a workhorse is from an ox” (257). This means of identification, presumably, applies to every level of possible classification, from genera down to the molecular level, and including the individual (which is, itself, multiple).

However, some theorists contend that Deleuze and Guattari’s depiction of the animal is flawed because it fails to take into account any actual animal. Donna Haraway, for example, faults Deleuze’s “wolfpack” and “becoming animal” for “the profound absence of curiosity about or respect for and with actual animals” (*Species* 27). This sort of criticism is not uncommon in ecocritical writing, which values the realm of contact, lived experience, over that of theory.<sup>129</sup> (Haraway’s recent book, for example, pays quite a bit of attention to the relationship she has with her pet—a relationship that marks her as a “fool” in Deleuze’s estimation.) However, her criticism surely also stems from her vision of the blending of robot, human, and animal in the figure she refers to as the “cyborg”: “By the late twentieth century, our time, a

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<sup>129</sup> Haraway surely recognizes that Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation does apply to actual animals, but that the “actual animal” is itself a shorthand for the cluster of possibilities a particular animal represents.

mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (150). As Ursula Heise explains the relation, any analysis of any of these components recognizes that “a consideration of human identity as altered by contemporary technologies is no longer complete without a concurrent account of its relation to animal modes of being” (504). That is, in Haraway’s thought, each element: technology, the human, and nature (represented by the animal), plays a role in constituting the other two. “The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks—language, tool use, social behavior, mental events, nothing really settles the separation of human and animal” (152). Haraway also criticizes the approach of technophobic theorists, who see humanity as imprisoned under a net of alienated technology and demand a return “to an imagined organic body” as a site of resistance (154).<sup>130</sup> A more helpful approach would be that of a “cyborg world,” in which humans accept that nature, the human and the machine are related. In this light, Haraway writes, “[m]ovements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture” (152).<sup>131</sup>

Matthew Calarco suggests referring to the work of Jacques Derrida to connect the concept of animals as multiple, and borders between human and animal as blurred beyond any utility on their part. According to Calarco, Derrida’s work “would forbid the possibility of making any kind of a clean distinction between human and animal, not only because of the irreducible plurality of beings, but also because of the multiplicity of becomings and relational structures between human and animal” (141). The ethical implications of blurring this category,

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<sup>130</sup> Haraway singles out Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (op. cit.) for particular criticism as examples of this strain of thought.

<sup>131</sup> Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*. (New York: Avon, 1975) and Tom Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) are the two legal-philosophical works generally cited as central to the movement’s beginnings.



writes Calarco, stem from what he calls a “disruptive, face-to-face encounter between singular beings” (141). Derrida depicts this relation in describing an encounter with his cat, stuck in the bathroom with him as he disrobes for his shower. It is this feline gaze that “offers...the abyssal limit of the human” (*Animal* 12). This “abyssal limit” is not especially firm, however, and it is not binary:

1. This abyssal rupture doesn’t describe two edges, a unilinear and indivisible line having two edges, Man and the Animal in general
2. The multiple and heterogeneous border of this abyssal rupture has a history. ...
3. Beyond the edge of the *so-called* human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than “The Animal” or “Animal Life” there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely ... a multiplicity of organization or lack of organization among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the organic and inorganic, of life and/or death. (*Animal* 31)

In this formulation, Derrida retains the figure of the multiple animal, the notion of a division between animal and humans, and a recognition that this division is provisional, multiple, and not at all clear and stable:

There is no interest to be found in debating something like a discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss between those who call themselves men and what so-called men, those who name themselves men, call the animal. Everybody agrees on this; discussion is closed in advance; one would have to be more asinine than any beast [*plus bête que les bêtes*] to think otherwise. (*Animal* 30)

These hazy borders outlining the abyssal rupture, however, the provisional borders of the realm of the animal, serve mainly to enable humans to define themselves, according to Derrida. That is, the “animal” is a category that humans instituted, and then went on to apply it to a certain class of living nonhumans. This category, Derrida writes, masks the multiple quality of the category of “animal”: “Whenever ‘one’ says ‘The Animal,’ each time a philosopher, or anyone else, says ‘The Animal’ in the singular and without further ado, claiming thus to designate every living thing that is held not to be human...well, each time the subject of that statement, this ‘one,’ this

‘I,’ does that he utters an *asinanity* [*bêtise*]” (31).<sup>132</sup> Humans, in this respect, define themselves in how they define the animal, how they use the word “that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond” (32). As a remedy at once playful and serious, Derrida proposes using the term “*l’animot*”—with its implications of text and plurality.

The question of the animals’ silence is key to much scholarly work in animal studies, because the silence of the creatures in the category creates a sort of vacuum, which invites all sorts of textual overlaying and fixing. Cary Wolfe suggests that scholars working in animal studies focus on “the specificity of nonhuman animals” instead of treating them “as primarily a theme, trope, metaphor, analogy, representation, or sociological datum (in which, say, relations of class, or race, or gender get played out and negotiated through the symbolic currency of animality and species difference)” (“All Too Human” 567). That specific creatures should not be reduced to the category of “animal” forms, Wolfe suggests, should constitute the basis of the question of animals’ position with regard to questions of justice. “[I]t seems clear that there is no longer any good reason to take it for granted that the theoretical, ethical, and political question of the subject is automatically coterminous with the species distinction between *Homo sapiens* and everything else,” he writes (*Animal Rites* 1). Wolfe suggests the adoption of the term speciesism, as an extension of other categories of “systematic discrimination against an other based solely on a generic characteristic—in this case, species” (*Animal Rites* 1). According to Wolfe, a better approach to the question of the animal in the realm of ethics is “not as the other-than-human but as the *infra-human*, not as the primitive and pure other we rush to embrace as a way to cure our

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<sup>132</sup> Spelling in original.

own existential malaise, but as part of us” (*Animal Rites* 17). Theory, he notes, reveals humans to be very different creatures than they portray themselves to be in text:

Rather, ‘we’ are always radically other, already in- or a-human in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, which we share, as animals, with animals, but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a radically ahuman precondition for our subjectivity, for what makes us human. (“All Too Human” 571)

The language which humans use to constitute the world, Wolfe notes, is always there before it is put to use (or, rather, before it puts humans to use). It is a sort of textual raw material, ready for deployment, and humans and animals alike are subject to it, as they are subject to the operations of the connections between material relationships in the environments they inhabit. With this in mind, though he does not identify his thought with it, Wolfe indicates that he understands the attraction of the Deep Ecological approach, which seeks to decenter humanity from its central, value-assigning position, for scholars in Animal Studies:<sup>133</sup> “The appeal of deep ecology and its demand that we recognize the inherent value of the biosphere and conduct ourselves accordingly is understandable for all sorts of scientific, ethical, historical, and political reasons” (24).

However, the appeal of the Deep Ecology approach also poses a danger, contends Luc Ferry. Ecology—and not just the Deep Ecology variety—is a totalizing, antimodern, master narrative that justifies and results in oppression of humans. Ferry sets out three kinds of ecology: the first, foundationally anthropocentric, posits that humans have to protect the environment, because failure to do so imperils humanity. The second, a utilitarian approach derived from Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill, seeks to minimize the total amount of suffering in the world, and includes animals as capable of suffering.<sup>134</sup> Ferry has little problem with the first two,

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<sup>133</sup> See chapter one for a fuller discussion of Deep Ecology.

<sup>134</sup> Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* is the classic development of this line of thought (op. cit.).

comparatively speaking. He reserves his particular ire for the last of his three ecologies: the concept of nature's "intrinsic value," outside of any human capacity to assign it such value. This is the outgrowth of Arne Naess's contention that anything with *conatus* ought to be respected—at least to the degree that humans can ascertain the interests of the nonhuman (xxiii-iv).<sup>135</sup> Ferry criticizes the work of Hans Jonas in particular, as the latter posits as humanity's last hope State restraint—totalitarian if necessary—on the domination and exploitation of nature (77).<sup>136</sup> This argument, Ferry writes, stems from an anti-modern demonizing of the cultural in favor of the natural—a process that abandons the concept of human freedom in favor of enslavement to biological necessity: "[T]he hatred of *artifice* connected with our civilization is also a *hatred of humans as such*. For man is the antinatural being par excellence" (xxviii). Culture, notes Ferry, is the byproduct of human freedom "*itself defined as separation from nature*" (40).<sup>137</sup> Animals, Ferry writes, belong to the realm of biological necessity, not of freedom and history: "*Until the existence of proof to the contrary, animals have no culture, but only customs and modes of life*" (41). As such, attempting to place humans in the same category is a means of depriving them of their freedom as well.<sup>138</sup> In this sense, the recognition of the rights of animals as independent from the interests of humans is simply another way for humans to exert control over other humans. That is, while individual animals may be devoted to individual humans, disinterested

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<sup>135</sup> Naess adopts the use of Spinoza's term. See chapter two for a fuller discussion of Naess's work.

<sup>136</sup> See Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (op. cit.).

<sup>137</sup> Emphasis in original

<sup>138</sup> Ferry writes, "It is because humankind is not bound to instinct, to biological processes alone, that it possesses a history, that generations follow one another but do not necessarily resemble each other—while the animal kingdom observes perfect continuity" (xxviii). The animal kingdom, of course, rarely observes "perfect continuity" in either a biological or behavioral sense.

actions on behalf of justice are not possible for animals, suggests Ferry: “We have seen men sacrifice their lives to protect whales; it must be said that the reverse is far less common” (41).

However, Ferry misreads Jonas’s basis for justifying state intervention in environmental protection. It is twofold: that humanity continues to exist, and that it lives well: “Put epigrammatically: the possibility of there being responsibility in the world, which is bound to the existence of men, is of all objects of responsibility the first” (99). Ferry’s accusations notwithstanding, Jonas is not guilty of decentering humanity from the world. Rather, he places humanity at the center of the reason for preserving the world. Jonas does not consider it possible to step outside of a human point of view with regard to the environment. On the contrary, it is by virtue of one’s humanity that Nature is able to make a claim. Ferry attributes this approach to “a Shelling-like romantic philosophy of nature, in which man appears as the summit of natural evolution more than as a being opposed to nature” (n. 28, p.81). However, in accordance with natural selection, the development of the human is no “summit.” It is, instead, the product of a specific set of interactions between material conditions.<sup>139</sup> Humanity is capable of artifice, but that that does not make it “anti-natural.” After all, the act of “decentering” humanity from the world requires the exercise of that most human of faculties: imaginative sympathy. One exercises the mind in imagining what it must be like to be a goat, or a salmon, or, as Aldo Leopold proposes, a mountain.

In the case of animals as depicted in literature, the animal and the text are difficult to separate, as each is implicated in the other. The encounter with the animal in the realm of experience affects the language ascribed to it. At the same time the animal also becomes an agent

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<sup>139</sup> Although, of course, more recently the quality of the human is increasingly subject to the tinkering of biotechnology and gene therapy. For a study of the implications of human-directed evolution, see Jürgen Habermas: *The Future of Human Nature*.

of text. In considering Kipling's *Jungle Books*, this chapter analyzes the animal as agent of law, at once model of and agent for a system of behavior that binds humanity as much as it does animals. The appeal to a law subject to slow change in certain key moments may undermine Kipling's narrative of colonialism. In the character of Mowgli, Kipling invents at once empire's agent, and the means of its downfall before the realm of nature.

### **Kipling, the Jungle, and the Law**

In reading and attempting to make sense of *The Jungle Books*, two observations should be made at the very start. First: Rudyard Kipling was an ardent advocate for the British Empire and the continuation of its global reach. Second: the Mowgli stories, without doubt, have a "function as sweetening the pill for the indoctrination of a Victorian imperialist," as W.W. Robson explains in the introduction to the 2008 edition of the works (xxi).<sup>140</sup> Kipling, Robson points out, was hoping for a new administration of India run, naturally, by people like Kipling: "the English born in India, who knew both worlds, and could pass from one to another, and back again, without being compromised" (xix). Perhaps the most important contemporary critique of Kipling and his work comes from Edward Said. For Said, Kipling (along with a few other writers—Joseph Conrad, for example) was one of the chief agents of orientalism. Expressed very simply, Said's concept of orientalism addresses a cluster of western textual approaches to "The East" in which knowledge produced about non-western cultures serves to justify desire and domination of those cultures.<sup>141</sup> It is important to recognize, however, that orientalizing discourse is not monolithic; the approaches and means of constituting knowledge of the oriental other differ. As Said explains: "[N]o one overarching theoretical principle governs the whole

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<sup>140</sup> Also, it should be noted, *The Jungle Books* formed the basis of some of the terminology and ethos of Gen. Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.

<sup>141</sup> The key works are Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* (op. cit.)

imperialist ensemble, and it should be just as evident that the principle of domination and resistance based on the division between the West and the rest of the world ... runs like a fissure throughout” (1993, 51). In many ways, Kipling is the perfect example of this imperial project. As John McBratney observes, Kipling did truly believe in the “white man’s burden”—the responsibility of the English as neo-imperial Romans to uphold the operation of law and order (22).

However, Kipling’s views on race were more complicated than some critics sometimes portray them.<sup>142</sup> “Kipling’s departure from official racial views went beyond affection and sympathy [for Indians],” McBratney writes. “His real unorthodoxy lay in his implicit challenge to the very racial typology behind which he seemed, so often, to stand foursquare” (28).<sup>143</sup> In the case of the Mowgli stories, for certain, there is enormous sympathy and admiration for the (fictional, of course) foundling child of an Indian village. Jonah Raskin sees the functioning of a sort of textual cover-up in the apparent fissures and contradictions in Kipling’s work. “Kipling stands for order, empire, and white men, and he stands for them precisely by going beyond them to describe disorder, Black men, loneliness, and horror” (44). There may be contrasts, Raskin observes, but those contrasts serve only to bolster Kipling’s totalizing vision of unity under empire. Any proclamation of brotherhood between Englishman and Indian, or between Mowgli and the animals, Raskin contends, is predicated on the latter’s recognition of the former’s legitimate and incontestable superiority. “[Kipling] would shake any man’s hand—Black or white, rich or poor—if he defended the empire” (43).

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<sup>142</sup> McBratney indicates in particular Kipling’s proud and vocal membership in a Freemasonic lodge in Lahore that admitted on principle both Indian and British members. His was the only lodge that did so (87).

<sup>143</sup> McBratney cites Bonamy Dobrée’s work *Rudyard Kipling, Realist and Fabulist*. London: Oxford UP, 1967.

The orientalist readings of Kipling have been essential to understanding the relation between British fiction and the operation of empire in India. However, the postcolonial discourse is but one strain among many in the analysis of how Kipling employs animals in his fables. Animals, as Robson notes, “are schoolmasters in animal costume” in the *Jungle Books* (xviii). However, depicted as animals, they are not reducible to just convenient vehicles for schoolmasterly lessons in jungle-civics. Animals in these stories are agents of the Law Kipling values so highly; this is true. However, in conveying this law to Mowgli, the animals bind him to the Law as well. That is, the law renders animal and orphan human equally bound to its principles. It is in this sense that in these stories human and animal become brothers and the connection between the single human and the natural animals becomes evident. Mowgli acts best when acting with animals against cruel and ignorant humanity. As Mowgli becomes an agent of the Law, he offers an implicit challenge to empire as well.

The setting of the Mowgli stories is as important to their operation as the characters in them. In depicting the jungle in India, Kipling at once describes a scene pastoral and wild—that is, it is pastoral *because* it is wild. The operation of backcountry as site of resistance to imperial resistance and domination is clear in several works of literature, as Cilas Kemedjio observes in his study of African literature: “L’arrière-pays mythologique ... oppose sa densité à l’ordre monologique et guerrier de la coloniale” (47). According to Angus Fletcher, the jungle becomes a stand in for India itself, “the sense of India as the Garden of Eden, before the fall, never left [Kipling]” (4).<sup>144</sup> However to the degree that the jungle functions as an edenic site, it does so on the basis of a pastoral tradition: a site out of the reach of the court and the city, where nature provides for humans without requiring any effort on their part. For Mowgli and his friends the

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<sup>144</sup> See also McBratney, 86.



jungle is at once garden and wilderness. It is a site of learning the law, of course (especially from Baloo), but it is as often a site of play. “When he [Mowgli] was not learning he sat out in the sun and slept, and ate and went to sleep again; when he felt dirty or hot he swam in the forest pools; and when he wanted honey (Baloo told him that honey and nuts were just as pleasant to eat as raw meat) he climbed up for it” (10). Mowgli has adopted the jungle as refuge from the appetite of the great tiger Shere Khan, but he must be taught by the animals how to inhabit it as a truly pastoral setting. Pastoral ease requires the law.

The jungle is wilderness, but with the animals as his teachers it becomes a garden for Mowgli. In “How Fear Came,” Kipling expressly paints the jungle as a version of Eden—but a fallen one. In the middle of a terrible drought that threatens the lives of the main characters, the elephant Hathi tells a jungle version of *Genesis*. In the earliest days of the jungle, he tells Mowgli, “there was no drought, and leaves and flowers and fruit grew on the same tree, and we ate nothing at all except leaves and flowers and grass and fruit and bark” (158).<sup>145</sup> Fear comes to the jungle through the acts of the first tiger, who first kills a buck by accident, and then, thinking he is killing “Fear,” slays a human. The sanctity of the edenic jungle garden is shattered when a tiger teaches humans how to kill. From that moment, the story goes, the human will hunt the animal:

He shall make the ground to open under thy feet, and the creeper to twist about thy neck, and the tree-trunks to grow together about thee higher than thou canst leap, and at the last he shall take thy hide to wrap his cubs when they are cold. Thou has shown him no mercy, and none will he show thee. (162-3)

Here, then, is the myth of the division of humanity from the animals. It comes in this story not from the *cogito* of Descartes, but of the first instance of humanity learning from nature how to behave. “Thou hast taught man to kill,” the first elephant, Tha, tells the first tiger, “and he is no

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<sup>145</sup> [Bagheera the panther interjects “I am glad I was not born in those days.”]

slow learner” (163). Though the account of Mowgli’s defeat of Shere Khan, “Tiger! Tiger!” appears first in the series, this fable explains the enmity between tiger and human. More important, in this fable Kipling locates the ability of humans to learn from nature in the primordial story of fear and death entering the jungle. In Kipling’s telling, the animals wrong humans first, and humans return the favor.

In teaching Mowgli the Law of the jungle, however, the animals have an opportunity, for a time, to make amends for the tiger’s first human kill. They do this by turning the jungle into a garden for Mowgli. Through the lessons of the animals, Mowgli is given an adolescence as a sort of new Adam in the Eden of the Indian jungle. This adamic idyll, however, is under constant threat while Shere Khan lives. The appearance of Mowgli in the den of his adoptive wolf parents in the first story “Mowgli’s Brothers,” is followed shortly after by the first jungle dispute over the application of the law. Shere Khan is an essentialist (Cary Wolfe might even term him a “speciesist”), who claims that the wolves have no business adopting and offering the protection of the pack to a human (many of the wolves agree with him). He demands that the wolves surrender Mowgli to him to eat. On the other hand, Baloo, the panther Bagheera and the remainder of the wolves recognize pack membership by will and free choice to affiliate.<sup>146</sup> Through the intercession of Baloo, the resident law professor, and Bagheera, who offers a freshly killed bull in exchange for his life, Mowgli becomes a pack member under the Law. However, even Mowgli’s legal standing is easily threatened at a wolf council to determine the fate of the wolves’ old chief, Akela, who has missed a kill for the first time and whose life therefore is forfeit:

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<sup>146</sup> McBratney writes than the tiger’s version “corresponds roughly to that held by racial typologists.” The view of the bear and panther, on the other hand, “anticipates the modern concept of ethnographic self-fashioning” (93).

“No man’s cub can run with the people of the jungle,” howled Shere Khan. “Give him to me!”

“He is our brother in all but blood,” Akela went on; “and ye would kill him here! ... More I cannot do; but if ye will, I can spare ye the shame that comes of killing a brother against whom there is no fault—a brother spoken for and bought into the Pack according to the Law of the Jungle.” (17)

According to Akela’s interpretation, Mowgli is a brother with the protection of the same law that protects the other jungle animals. His status as human matters a great deal, but it does not matter to the application of the law. Mowgli, resorting to human prerogatives and techniques, deploys fire to defeat the opposing wolves and humiliate and singe Shere Khan. He also changes the law: Akela is not to be harmed. Under the old law, he would soon be killed.

The shift in the law is an important moment in the text. The Law of Kipling’s jungle is not the Social Darwinian “law of the jungle,” which posits a zero-sum game between members of the same species. Rather, as McBratney observes, it is an “old, slowly evolving, carefully calibrated set of rules that is meant to preserve order in the jungle” (91). The main goal of the law is not to keep peace, but to keep order. The distinction is important, because, as McBratney notes, the law is subject to change—and not just by Mowgli as representative of the human:

The jungle law is not something bestowed by God or Nature but something created by the folk of the jungle... If truth-telling, adherence to one’s word, loyalty to the pack, respect for one’s elders, and, above all, obedience to tribal codes have defined jungle society for countless generations, it is because each new generation has found these qualities the best means by which to ensure its well-being. (91)

In these stories the law exists before the animals do. It is made by them and their ancestors, not imposed on them by humans. Within the realm of the jungle, the law binds all creatures, but the law is by no means permanent in its provisions. Further, any creature can change the law by assent, not just Mowgli (who does it by threatening the assembly with fire; though, to be fair, his opponents *were* about to renege on their pledge not to let him be eaten by a tiger). Its provisions as set out asystematically by Kipling from story to story, include rules for dividing food (“The

Kill of the Pack is the meat of the Pack.” [167]), for settling disputes, and for relations with humanity—entities not of the jungle, but who venture into it from time to time: “*seven times never kill Man*” (166).<sup>147</sup> The relationship between man and the law is a complicated one for Mowgli, who is at once man and wolf: “I am a wolf,” he tells Akela before the old wolf dies. “It is no will of mine that I am a man” (300). Yet humanity’s status as taboo prey works to establish Shere Khan’s bullying lawlessness from the start of the stories. His refusal to follow the law endangers all of those who share the jungle with him. When a jungle animal kills a man, that “means, sooner or later, the arrival of white men on elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gongs and rockets and torches. Then everybody in the jungle suffers” (3). In instructing Mowgli, Baloo recognizes that knowledge of the jungle laws (really, in the case of his instruction, more like protocols of proper jungle etiquette) is the difference between Mowgli’s life and death. When the lessons are learned (not without the occasional Victorian public-school-style thrashing from Baloo), “[Mowgli] can now claim protection, if only he will remember the words, from all in the jungle. Is that not worth a little beating?” (23). In order for Mowgli to survive in the jungle, he must learn the law from the animals who adopt him. They are at once the representatives of nature and the agents of the most human of artifacts, whether wild or not: codes of law and etiquette. The kinship between the human Mowgli and the creatures of the jungle is expressed frequently in the expression “We be of one blood, you and I.” That is, both human and animal are subject, by blood, to the same jungle rules of order, even as humans in general stand outside the jungle and its rules.

While recognizing that humans are, in a sense, outside the law of the jungle, Baloo and the other animals reserve their disdain for creatures who have no law at all: the *Bandar-log*, the

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<sup>147</sup> Emphasis in original.

monkeys. When Baloo learns that Mowgli has been visiting the monkeys, he pins the boy and issues a lecture:

“Listen man-cub ... I have taught thee all the Law of the Jungle for all the peoples of the jungle—except the Monkey-Folk who live in the trees. They have no law. They are outcasts. They have no speech of their own, but use the stolen words which they overhear when they listen, and peep, and wait up above in the branches. Their way is not our way. They are without leaders. They have no remembrance. They boast and chatter and pretend that they are a great people about to do great affairs in the jungle, but the falling of a nut turns their minds to laughter and all is forgotten. We of the jungle have no dealings with them. We do not drink where the monkeys drink; we do not do where the monkeys go; we do not hunt where they hunt; we do not die where they die ...” (26)

This passage certainly stands out as a possible example of the racist, imperialist, Kipling, the Kipling of “lesser breeds without the law.” However, the depiction of the monkey people is difficult to tie to any particular group. Robson, for example, suggests that it might apply as well to the uglier aspects of democracy in any number of countries, and also to “London (or any other) literary circles” (xxvi). However, the passage may function best as, in the words of Robson: “a standing metaphor, available for application to the relevant experience of the reader” (xxvi). There are two important aspects of the *Bandar-log* to notice. First, and most obvious, they are animals without the law, and worthy of disgust and scorn. Second, *they are the animals of the jungle that are most like humans*. The behavior of the wolves, of Shere Khan, and of Baloo, stems from recognizably human motives, both admirable and fearful. Baloo, for example, behaves very much like a grumpy headmaster; Shere Khan, like a criminal. However, as a group, the “Free Peoples” of the jungle have motives that matter to animals—at least as depicted in the text. They show humans how to behave with honor according to the law. The monkeys, on the other hand, are parodies of humanity: humans at their most contemptible. When the monkeys kidnap Mowgli, they bring him to the ruins of a city where they have taken up residence:

They would sit in circles on the hall of the king’s council chamber, and scratch for fleas and pretend to be men; ... [They] drifted about in ones and twos or crowds telling each

other that they were doing as men did. They drank at the tanks and made the water all muddy, and then they fought over it, and then they would all rush together in mobs and shout: "There is no one in the jungle so wise and good and clever and strong and gentle as the Bandar-log." (31)

Kipling has the animals of the jungle reserve their greatest contempt for the animals who have no law, the animals who instead try to imitate humanity. The disgust stems not from the failure of the monkeys to imitate people, but from their *success*. "Men are blood-brothers to the Bandar-log," Mowgli remarks in a later story. The animals most akin to humans are the only ones with whom Mowgli does not claim to be of the same blood. Mowgli is rescued from the mock-human monkeys by Kaa, the primordial representative of the jungle, alien even to Baloo and Bagheera. In his wisdom and the vague aura of fear surrounding him, Kaa is kin to the dragons of literature. However, in the realism of his skin-shedding, his deafness, the "rustle of the scales" as the snake forms "loops and figures of eight with his body ... and coiled mounds, never resting, never hurrying," Kaa is arguably the most "animal" of the creatures of the jungle (44). Again, Mowgli's salvation is not in the realm of the human, but in the law of the animal.

When jungle law is applied to humans outside of the jungle, Mowgli is the agent of its force. However, his first encounter with human settlement subjects him to the inanity of human law. After his clash with Shere Khan at the council, Mowgli leaves the jungle for the village ("Tiger! Tiger"). When he arrives, he undergoes the human corollary to his initiation into the jungle. First, the villagers point and shout and call for the priest; the comparison with the behavior of the Bandar-log is evident, even before Mowgli remarks that they behave like gray apes. Shortly after this, a respected elder (the village priest) accepts him into the community and entrusts him to the care of foster parents. (In the priest's case, however, he does this not out of a

sense of justice but out of a keen awareness that Mowgli's adopted parents are wealthy.)<sup>148</sup> Mowgli again is an outsider, and as he had to learn to reside in the pastoral wilderness of the jungle, the realm of the animal, so he must learn to inhabit the city, the realm of the human. Instead of proclaiming his humanity, Mowgli couches his status in terms of becoming: "Well, if I am a man, a man I must become" (49). Though the statement seems a contradiction, Mowgli understands his humanity in the same way that he understands his wolf-nature—it is a result of practice and behavior, not status. When Gray Brother (Mowgli's "litter mate") visits him at night on the outskirts of the village he asks: "Thou wilt not forget that thou art a wolf? Men will not make thee forget?" (51). In this interaction, being a wolf depends on the *practice* of being a wolf (it is an understanding Deleuze might have appreciated). That is: Mowgli is a wolf as long as he continues to act like a wolf. It is because he remains a wolf, subject to the laws of the jungle, that Mowgli manages to keep his temper when the villagers make fun of him for mispronouncing words or failing to understand the use of money (51). Although the lessons of the jungle are matters of life and death to Mowgli, the lessons of the village seem frivolous by comparison. As teachers, humans are less effective, and they convey matters of less import. The law of humans is not at all like the jungle animals' Law, which has a weighty quality to it, as if it distilled the proper way of things decided over a long time by the representatives of Nature. The men of the village drive Mowgli away after he and his wolf allies defeat Shere Khan; they fear him as a sorcerer. Again, Mowgli has been cast out of a pack: "Last time it was because I was a man. This time it is because I am a wolf" (62).

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<sup>148</sup> The connection between Messua, Mowgli's adoptive mother, and his real mother is made plan more than once. Though Messua, too, lost a child to a tiger, she remarks that Mowgli cannot be he. Rather, he is a return gift of the jungle.

However, it is the law of the jungle as Mowgli brings it to the village that takes precedence over the law of humans. Kipling depicts the clash between human and nonhuman law most carefully in the tale “Letting in the Jungle.” In it, Mowgli hears that the villagers, convinced that Mowgli is a demon-child, have imprisoned his adoptive parents. They intend to torture them until they confess that they are sorcerers, and then burn them to death.<sup>149</sup> Mowgli sneaks into the village and frees them. As they prepare to flee the village to region administered by the English, Messua’s husband tells his plans to bring a lawsuit against the villagers who have mistreated him and his wife. “I will have a great justice,” he says. Mowgli replies: “I do not know what justice is, but—come next Rains and see what is left” (197). The pursuit of human justice is alien to Mowgli; however the application of jungle law is not. Mowgli, once apprentice to the agents of nature as he learned jungle law, now enforces the claims of nature on the settlements of unjust humans. Summoning the elephant Hathi and his three sons, Mowgli directs them to “let in the jungle” on the village of the people who had imprisoned and beaten his foster parents. The language Kipling attributes to Mowgli couches the boy’s act of vengeance in the words of nature reclaiming a human settlement. There is to be no bloodshed; the humans are to flee, but the jungle will claim the village:

“Let them run ... till we have the rain-water for the only plough, and the noise of the rain on the thick leaves for the pattering of their spindles—till Bagheera and I lair in the house of the Brahmin, and the buck drink at the tank behind the temple! Let in the Jungle, Hathi!” (204)

Enlisting the aid of the other jungle creatures, the elephants destroy the village until little remains but a pile of rubble. The villagers manage to flee unharmed, but “[a] month later the place was a dimpled mound, covered with soft, green, young stuff; and by the end of the Rains there was the

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<sup>149</sup> The depiction of the sadistic “law” and cruel superstition of the Indian villagers surely is an episode of orientalism. Indian village law has no weight compared to the law of the jungle. Nor, one might add, in comparison with the weight of English Common Law.



roaring Jungle ... on the spot that had been under plough not six months before” (210). The animals who taught Mowgli the Law now look at him with pride and not a little fear: “Art *thou* the naked thing I spoke for in the Pack when all was young? Master of the Jungle, when my strength goes, speak for me,” says Bagheera. “We are cubs before thee!” (205). Mowgli has grown able to apply the laws of wild nature to the realm of humans.

Recognition of Mowgli’s superiority among his jungle animal brethren is without doubt an indication of the superiority of the agents of the British Empire in India. Mowgli may claim brotherhood, but only insofar as the animals recognize his authority. As Raskin observes, the central tension in the Mowgli stories is that of empire and law against Indians and anarchy: “*The Jungle Book* culminates in a vision of Imperial hierarchy,” he writes (40-1). Along the same lines, McBratney indicates that the flight of Mowgli’s foster parents to the British sets the stage for the operation of his allies, the nilghai, elephants, wolves and other predators who “as a trans-species imperial corps, bringing a more orderly law to the *ruk*h” (99). In these stories, the English are allied more closely with the law of the wild nature of India than with that of the Indian people. By portraying them as akin to the Jungle, Kipling makes the English more authentically Indian than the Indians whose village Mowgli has destroyed. In this sense, McBratney writes, the *Jungle Books* are “a tract whose religion is empire” (87). Both scholars rightly indicate the success of the imperial vision in the Mowgli stories. However, this vision of imperial dominance is shot through with (doubtless unintended, but also clear) critique of the operation of empire. In one much-discussed episode in “Letting in the Jungle,” Bagheera becomes intoxicated with the hunt, and asks Mowgli if the time has come to hunt the men who wronged his adoptive parents:

“Who is Man that we should care for him—the naked brown digger, the hairless and toothless, the eater of earth? ... I herded him as the wolves herd buck ... I am

Bagheera—in the Jungle—in the night, and my strength is in me. Who shall stay my stroke? Man-cub, with one blow of my paw I could beat thy head as flat as a dead frog in the summer.” (198)

Bagheera’s vision is of a humanity pathetic and weak, subject to the strength of the jungle animals. Mowgli’s response is to dare Bagheera to strike him, and then stare “full into the beryl-green eyes till the red glare behind their green went out” (198). Bagheera then cowers before Mowgli, one of the “naked brown” men whom he had threatened, and licks his instep. Mowgli strokes Bagheera’s back and whispers “Brother—Brother—Brother!” to the panther, but McBratney writes that “Mowgli’s condescension is obvious, as is the contradiction in his fraternal address” (96). Mowgli’s assertion of human dominance is analogous to the superiority of empire, and works to naturalize the superiority of the empire’s agents. However, the episode also can be read as Mowgli reminding his “brother” and mentor, the panther, of the law that binds them both—not to seek to kill man, and to hold one’s peace during the hunt. Mowgli operates as an agent of the law only to the extent that he abandons humanity for the realm of the animal. Only in his kinship with the wild is Mowgli able to serve as his friends do—as agents and masters of law. As kin to those who taught him the primacy of wild natural law, Mowgli has learned that such a law can apply outside of the jungle as well. Though Kipling portrays the British Empire as benign, it is difficult not to imagine a mature Mowgli, some decades in the future, “letting in the jungle” on the remnants of empire.

The following section, which considers the Ikhwân al-Safâ’s *The Case of the Animals versus Man*, also examines a text in which the qualities of humans as heirs to law and reason are challenged and critiqued. In this 10<sup>th</sup> century work, however, the animals are more than teachers limited to a specific environment. In this early fable, animals challenge humanity in its own environment—the courts, and they use the most human of tools—rhetoric, to plead their case

before the King of the Jinn. As in the *Jungle Books*, the superiority of humanity is confirmed in the face of critique from the natural world, but only provisionally. In the earlier work, much of the contest takes place in the act of reading both nature and text as a means of seeking to understand the mind of God.

### **Masters of the Law: The Human and the Animal**

Though worthy of study as an independent work, *The Case of the Animals versus Man* appears as part of a much larger whole, in Epistle 22 of the *Rasâ'il* (or *Epistles*), the massive, encyclopedic collection of essays by the *Ikhwân al-Safâ'*, (the “Pure Brethren”) of Basra. In many ways it is a work with a more modern ecological outlook than that of Kipling’s fables. Animals are assigned niches, behaviors, characteristics, and the connections between animals, and between animals and humans, play an important role in determining how the natural world is to be understood in the worldview of the Brethren. Of course, this “trial” also is a fable, but unlike Kipling’s work its gospel is not empire. Instead, the Brethren’s chief concern is the proper relationship between humans and animals under the regime of the divine. This section of the *Epistles* concerns natural science, and is devoted to a synthesis of neoplatonic and Aristotelian conceptions of nature, as interpreted to conform with the *Qur'an*. Unlike the animals in *The Jungle Books*, the animals of *The Case of the Animals* represent only their own interests (as imagined, of course, by humans). Assigning voices to these creatures requires an imaginative act: a speculative identification with nonhuman life, which recognizes a law that binds both animal and human.

Because the Brethren met and published in secret, historians and philologists have had a difficult time determining much about the group with any precision. About all that can be said with any certainty of consensus among scholars is that the group operated in secret sometime in

the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE in Basra (in what is present-day Iraq).<sup>150</sup> It comprised several lettered men—possibly scribes, advisors, or secretaries—with some connection to Ismâ‘îlism, and some exposure to Hellenic philosophy. Citing the account of Abû Hayyân al-Tawhîdî, a philosopher in the tenth/eleventh centuries whom he considers a reliable source, Farhad Daftary maintains that a *qâdi*, or judge, Abu’l-Hasan ‘Alî b. Hârûn al-Zanjâni, was the group’s leader (235).<sup>151</sup> These literati were members of what Richard Foltz calls “a radical group, as indicated by their choice to remain anonymous” (251). The group took its name from *Kalîla wa-Dimna* (*Kalila and Dimna*), a collection of Sanskrit fables from the *Panchatantra* also known as the *Fables of Bidpai*. ‘Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ had translated the collection in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and it was widely known enough for the Brethren to refer to it specifically in offering advice for salvation to their readers:

You need for your redemption and liberation from this world of generation and corruption—and ascension into the world of celestial spheres—and proximity to God’s close angels, the assistance of brethren who are sincere advisers and associated with you by bonds of friendship, who are virtuous and have insight into the affairs of religion, so that they can apprise you of the path of the hereafter and how to attain it. So, take an example from the story of the ring-dove mentioned in the book of *Kalîla wa-Dimna* and how it freed itself from the snare.<sup>152</sup> (*Rasâ’il*, vol. 1, p. 100)

The use of fables for the communication of wisdom, then, was nothing new or daring for the Brethren, deriving as they did their name from another set of tales offering moral (if not necessarily spiritual) instruction in the form of animal tales. They were familiar with the use of

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<sup>150</sup> This study employs Common Era dating throughout for sake of uniformity. However, several scholars employ *Hegira* or dual dating when referring to events in primarily Muslim realms. The 10<sup>th</sup> century CE corresponds for the most part to the 4<sup>th</sup> century of the *Hegira*.

<sup>151</sup> Daftary reports that Abû-hayyân knew Zanjâni.

<sup>152</sup> The translation is Ismail K. Poonawara’s, and can be found in “Why We Need an Arabic Critical Edition with an Annotated English Translation of the *Rasâ’il Ikhwân al-Safâ’*.” In El-Bizri. The notation refers to the Beirut edition of the *Rasâ’il: Ikhwân al-Safâ’*, *Rasâ’il Ikhwân al-Safâ’*, (ed. Butrus Bustânî, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dâr Sâdir, 1957). Incidentally, the ring dove in the fable is freed from the snare by its friends.

animals in text to teach humans not only how to behave, but how to improve their spiritual practice.

That practice, according to most (but by no means all) of the scholars who have worked on the Brethren, was primarily Ismâ'îli. According to Daftary, the Ismâ'îli are the second-largest of the Shî'a groups, after the Imami, or "Twelvers." The Ismâ'îli Shi'a founded the first Shi'a caliphate under the Fatimids in Egypt, at approximately the time the Brethren were writing their Epistles.<sup>153</sup> The Ismâ'îli, notes Daftary, have a history of shrouding their activity, as the hostility of other Muslim groups drove them into clandestine activity and obscurantism (xvi).<sup>154</sup> Nader el-Bizri notes that "in an attempt to confirm the Ismaili character of the *Rasâ'il*, some interpreters emphasise the Ikhwân's belief that religion (*'ilm al-Dîn*) carried two aspects: one, exoteric qua manifest (*zâhir jalî*), and the other, esoteric qua concealed (*bâtin khafî*)" (9). However, there are some difficulties to overcome in ascribing Ismâ'îli practice too heartily to the Brethren. El-Bizri, for example, is not certain whether the Brethren are more properly classified as *Ithnâ'asharî* (Twelvers) or Ismâ'îli, and, "to further complicate the speculations, even if the Ikhwân are seen to be Ismailis, it is not proven whether they had specific associations with the Fâtimids or the Qarmatis, or whether they reflected any of the pre-Fâtimid proclivities of Ismailism" (6). Further, Daftary notes, the Brethren neglect to mention the Fâtimid caliphs, and the Epistles seem to have had no influence on the literature and thought of the classical Fâtimid period. "In other words, the *Rasâ'il* do not seem to have been adopted or endorsed, in any significant sense, by the

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<sup>153</sup> A comprehensive history of Ismailism is Daftary's *The Ismâ'îlîs: Their History and Doctrine* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed).

<sup>154</sup> Daftary contends that the necessity of hiding Ismâ'îli practice effectively abandoned discourse pertaining to Ismailism to its enemies until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These opponents included "the majority of the medieval Muslim historians, theologians, heresiographers and polemicists, as well as the fanciful stories related by the occidental chroniclers of the Crusaders" (xvi). The latter accounts took the practices of Syrian Nizaris (a sect known in Europe as the Assassins) for orthodox Ismailism.

Fâtimid Ismâ'îlî *da'wa*,” he writes (236).<sup>155</sup> The Brethren practiced an extremely tolerant version of Islam, in which they write of “[e]ncountering ‘veracity in every religion’ (*al-haqq fî kull dîn mawjûd*),” according to el-Bizri (10).<sup>156</sup> He adds that the Brethren attributed difference in faith to accidents of birth such as race and geography; the truth, however, did not change. Because of this, the Brethren vowed not to cling to any one creed, nor to be hostile to any kind of knowledge: “Our creed comprises all creeds and embraces all sciences.”<sup>157</sup> The group used pre-Islamic sources, Indian and Babylonian texts, and Christian and Jewish traditions to construct their syncretic philosophy. However, the most important non-Islamic tradition of thought derived from Greek philosophy. As Daftary explains: “the *Epistles* are permeated throughout with Hermetic, Platonic, Aristotelian, Neopythagorean, and especially Neoplatonic ideas and doctrines” (237).<sup>158</sup>

Reliable information about the *Epistles* is as difficult to obtain as precise information about the Brethren who composed them. The work comprises 52 essays divided into four books by topic: mathematics (including astronomy, geometry, and music), natural sciences, intellectual sciences, and theology. It also includes a final summary “intended for the more advanced adepts”: the *al-Risâla al-jâmi'a* (Daftary 236). El-Bizri notes that most scholars of the work

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<sup>155</sup> *Da'wa* translates approximately to “rightly guiding mission” of Ismâ'îlî orthodoxy. It derives from *al-da'wa al-hâdiya* (Daftary 2). For a study that contests any connection between the Brethren and Ismailism, see Ian R. Netton. *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the thought of the Brethren of Purity*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2000. While recognizing the importance of this critical, theological, philological debate, the current study will not engage in it.

<sup>156</sup> El-Bizri is quoting *Rasâ'il*, Epistle 42, vol. 3, p. 501.

<sup>157</sup> Cited in Poonawala, 42 (op. cit.). The quote is from *Rasâ'il*, vol. 4: 426.

<sup>158</sup> Peter Heath notes: “the process of translating Hellenistic science and philosophy into Arabic was largely completed in the East by the end of the fourth/tenth century.” Available works would have included “Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy, Galen, and Hippocrates, along with important Hellenistic commentaries, with more limited exposure to the original works of Plato, mainly the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, and summaries or secondary accounts of *The Republic*.” See Heath: “Knowledge” in Menocal 116-17.

place its composition sometime between 961 and 980, with 986 as the most recent possible year for finishing composition (3).<sup>159</sup> Though Daftary reports that the collection had little influence on Fâtimid thought until nearly 200 years after its composition, Yahya Michot observes that the Mamlûk theologian Taqî al-Dîn Ibn Tamiyya, who considered the Epistles heretical, traced their influence in particular to Ibn Sinâ and al-Ghazâlî (175). Their popularity, Lenn Goodman has found, extended to Europe, where it was both “highly popular” and “widely read” in the Middle Ages. Rabbi Joel and Rabbi Jacob ben Elazar both translated the work into Latin and Hebrew sometime around 1240, though as far as researchers have been able to confirm, those editions have not survived. However, Goodman writes, a Hebrew translation survives, rendered in 1316 by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos, a Jewish Provençal scholar, who also translated *Kalila and Dimna* (249-50).<sup>160</sup> To date there have been three complete editions of the Epistles: Bombay (1887-9), Cairo (1928), and Beirut (1957), though no critical edition of the text exists.<sup>161</sup>

The text of the *Epistles* shows that the influence of Neoplatonism was especially important to the Brethren’s understanding of their universe. Daftary refers to the underlying philosophy as “Ismâ’îlî Neoplatonism,” on the basis of which they elaborated their “emanational cosmological doctrine” (235). The basic premise of Neoplatonism appears in the *Enneads* of

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<sup>159</sup> Not all scholars agree, of course. Abbas Hamdani, as el-Bizri notes, dates the collection earlier, with composition beginning around 873 and ending close to 909. See A. Hamdani. “Brethren of Purity, a Secret Society for the Establishment of the Fâtimid Caliphate: New Evidence for the Early Dating of their Encyclopedia,” in Marianne Barrucand, ed. *L’Égypte Fatimide, son art et son histoire*. Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999, pp. 73-82.

<sup>160</sup> Goodman adds that Kalonymos was a translator for Charles Robert, Duke of Anjou. He also translated Ibn Rushd’s *Tahâfut al-Tahâfut* (“The Incoherence of the Incoherence”) into Latin.

<sup>161</sup> “These [works] are *Kitâb Ikhwân al-Safâ’ wa-Khullân al-Wafâ’* (Bombay, 1305-1306/1887-1889), 4 vols; *Rasâ’il Ikhwan al-Safâ’ wa-Khullân al-Wafâ’*, ed. Khayr al-Dîn al-Ziriklî with introduction by Tâhâ Husayn and Ahmad Zakî Pasha (Cairo, 1347/1928), 4 vols., and *Rasâ’il Ikhwân al-Safâ’ wa-Khullân al-Wafâ’*, with an introduction by B. al-Bustânî (Beirut, 1957), 4 vols.” (Daftary, 597-8). A critical edition with English translation is in progress at the Department of Academic Research and Publications at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.

Plotinus, in which every entity from thought to mud emanates through intermediaries from the One:

Resembling the One thus, Intellect produces in the same way, pouring forth a multiple power ... just as that which was before it poured forth. This activity springing from the substance of Intellect is Soul, which comes to be this while Intellect remains unchanged: for Intellect too comes into being while that which is before it abides unchanged.<sup>162</sup> (V, 2.1)

The concept of reality emanating from the One, which guarantees existence from moment to moment, underlies much of Islamic mysticism, according to Parviz Morewedge: “it is in the general Neoplatonic form of cosmology that Islamic mysticism finds its natural home” (226). In the Brethren’s interpretation of Neoplatonism, according to Carmela Baffioni, because each level of reality passes from the One down to the very lowest, simplest entity, by studying the science of each level of reality a scholar ultimately could attain “the ‘science of God’ in the double sense of pertaining to God and concerning God” (8). Baffioni adds that Neoplatonism is no “mere foreign source.” Rather, “Neoplatonism (merged with Neopythagorism) can be considered as the Ikhwân's proper philosophy” (8). This adoption of Neoplatonic thought contributed to several aspects of the Brethren’s approach. First, it influenced the way in which the Brethren organized their *Epistles*. More important, however, is the concept that it is necessary to shed one’s connection to the material as prerequisite to profound understanding of scripture. That is, as noted earlier, spiritual text has an exoteric (*zâhir*) meaning, open to the masses of people, and an esoteric (*bâtin*) sense available only to the wise. The more one learns to shed the physical, and with it the literal interpretation of the text, the more one will understand that scripture

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<sup>162</sup> The translation is by A. H. Armstrong.



harmonizes with rational philosophy.<sup>163</sup> El-Bizri suggests that the writing of the *Epistles* stemmed from a desire to “accomplish some form of harmony between faith and reason, by reconciling monotheistic revelation with philosophy” (10). In realizing this project, the Brethren had to address the question of humanity’s relation to the universe—not only to the nonliving matter of the world’s foundations, but also to the living creatures of which humans also make use.

In their conceptual framework for creation, the Brethren adopted a literal interpretation of the analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, writes el-Bizri: “the Ikhwân apprehended the human being as a *micro-cosmos* (*al-insân ‘âlam saghir*; Epistle 26) and the universe as a *macro-anthropos* (*al-‘âlam insân kabîr*; Epistle 34)” (11). Included in their concept of the universe as a living, humanlike, organism is the idea of nature: *tabî‘a*, which Foltz contends Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages used as a rough equivalent of the Greek *physis*. This *tabî‘a*, however, is only one possible manifestation of the One, Foltz writes, “a potentiality spreading through all sublunar bodies” (250). This potentiality is a manifestation of *amr*, or “command.” However, as S. Nomanul Haq writes, *amr* also implies order and intelligibility. In more than one sense it is analogous to *logos*, as the principle of reason or mind rendering the cosmos intelligible to humans. Each entity fills its role according to the will of God, the operation of *amr*. As Haq explains, the “laws of nature express God’s commands, commands that nature cannot possibly violate—and this explains why the entire world of phenomena is declared muslim by the Qur’ân” (137). That is: all things derive their purpose not from humanity, but from God. The things of creation derive their value from the nonhuman realm, and their purposes are not human purposes,

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<sup>163</sup> See, Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists* and el-Bizri. This is a theme addressed by several Muslim philosophers of this period and shortly afterward, among them: Ibn Bajja, al-Farabi, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn ‘Arabi, and Ibn Rushd (Averröes).

but divine ones. It is not so strange, then, that the animal realm has standing to bring suit against humanity. As part of creation, they are bearers of divine law, reason, *amr*. And as Muslims who cannot disobey God, they have access to the courts when they have grievances against their neighbors in creation. *The Case of the Animals versus Man* certainly is a fable, and it may in a sense be read as a parody of the operation of human courts, but it also indicates the way in which creation bears the weight of divine law—quite independent of human will. In this epistle the Brethren attempt to imagine what an animal might say were it given its day in court against humanity. “The Ikhwân al-Sâfa’ were just the sort of thoughtful inquirers who could make that kind of moral and literary leap,” Goodman writes (249). The contest between the sides is one of criticism—of reading the text of scripture and reconciling that reading with experience of the world. Both humans and animals at once are reading text and nature, and setting their readings against each other. The command of God is present in the world in the same degree that it is present in text—as emanation from the One.

The fable begins with pastoral: Balâsaghûn, the island of Bîwarâsp the Wise, the King of the Jinn.<sup>164</sup> The island landscape is the familiar terrain of Arcadia or Eden: “There the air and soil were good. There were sweet rivers, bubbling springs, ample fields, and sheltered resting places, varieties of trees and fruit, lush meadows, herbs, and flowers.” The scene unfolds as pure pastoral: the garden enduring while humans can only observe or visit, and disappearing when they decide to take up residence. The animals are there first, sharing the island “in peace and harmony with each other, demure and unafraid” (52). Then, as the story often goes, humans arrive, and throw the harmony of the island into disarray by hunting the animals and forcing

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<sup>164</sup> Goodman notes that the name of the Jinn is Persian. Balâsaghûn, on the other hand, was a Soghedian town. The Brethren locate it in the Indian Ocean, which they call the Green Sea (note 7).

them into slavery. The animals flee and bring their complaint to Bîwarâsp, to ask him to rule against the humans' claim that the animals rightly are slaves.<sup>165</sup> In the first hearing before the king, the human spokesman cites Qur'an verses to support the human claim that the animals are to be their slaves—cattle, according to the verses, are for food, horses and mules for transportation and show.<sup>166</sup> The animals' spokesman, a mule, counters that the verses the human cites do not justify slavery, but only show “the kindness and blessings which God vouchsafed to mankind” (54). The animals are to be the servants of humans, according to the Qur'an, in the same way as the sun and moon, wind and stars. “Are we to think ... that these, too, are their slaves and chattels?” (54). The mule describes the awful cruelty of humanity:

[T]he Adamites [*banû Âdam*]<sup>167</sup> pressed after us, hunting us with every kind of wile and device. Whoever fell into their hands was yoked, haltered, and fettered. They slaughtered and flayed him, ripped open his belly, cut off his limbs and broke his bones, tore out his eyes; ... and put him on the fire to be cooked, or on the spit to be roasted, or subjected him to even more dire tortures, whose full extent is beyond description. (55)

This first exchange establishes the pattern for the rest of the fable. Humans try to quote from scripture, or attempt to make a case based on their skill and practices; the animals reply, showing that the human reading perverts the meaning of scripture, or that the qualities of which humans are so proud come from God, and not from their own labor or merit. However, humans are responsible for their cruelty, and the graphic description of the animals' suffering at the hands of humans is meant to call into question the suitability of humanity to be master of anything (in addition to establishing the mule at least as a master of the rhetorical flourish). In the elaborate prayers that open each side's case, humans are careful to include praise for Muhammad, while

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<sup>165</sup> Bîwarâsp is an appropriate judge for two main reasons: he is neither human nor animal but Jinn, a fire spirit; and his sense of justice is unquestioned: “a wise, just, and noble king ... he had mercy for the afflicted and did not allow injustice” (52).

<sup>166</sup> The verses cited are: 16:5-6, 23:22, and 16:8.

<sup>167</sup> “Sons of Adam.” All translations are from Goodman.

the animals reserve their praise for “God, One, Unique, and Alone” (54). The degree of fidelity to *amr*, the law or command of God, is at stake: whether the animals are rebelling against it or humans overstepping their authority under it. At the court of the jinn, the animals demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of *amr* than humans do.

Part of the effectiveness of the animals’ case against the humans stems from the quality and location of the competition: a courtroom debate. In order to pursue a case in court requires above all speech, and, secondarily: standing. That is: the sides must be seen as equals under the law. Simply by having them appear in a suit against humanity, the Brethren have neutralized two characteristics humans generally use to establish their distinction from and superiority to animals: reason and speech. In their suit, these animals speak and they debate better than the spokesmen for humanity. As Goodman observes: “[o]nce the animals are given voices, they find a great deal to say, not only about their own plight but also about the human condition” (251). In this arrangement, the Brethren establish animals as having their own interests, and equal claims to pursuing them. Before the court, the distinction between the animal and the human under the law is elided—and skill in the application of the law generally appears more among the animals than humans. The Brethren are careful to use human means to persuade their human readers. The animals become not only masters of the law, but plaintiffs—and even officers (in their capacity as lawyers) of the court. The humans and animals both create their own texts in an effort to establish supremacy (on the human side) or justice (on the animals’ side). These speeches rely as much on reading and interpreting the mind of God made manifest in nature as it does on God’s mind made manifest in text. It is a battle of reading, of criticism. The more insightful interpreters of text and world have the best chance of winning their suit.

However, it is not simply a rhetorical structure that establishes the animals as humans' equals. The Brethren enable the animals to challenge humanity in clashing interpretations of the world as well as the word. When the humans' attempt to establish their reading of scripture fails, they turn to the world of action and experience. However, again, for each achievement—or list of achievements—there is a corresponding failure. When the Iraqi speaks, he lists all the civilizing achievements of humanity's rulers: "who channeled rivers for irrigation, ordered trees to be planted, cities and villages to be built, established the order of the realm" (199). To this, one of the jinn (described as "hardheaded") replies: "He did not say 'On our account the Deluge was sent, submerging all animals and plants on the face of the earth'" (120). The Khorasân, of the Persian region of the Caspian Sea, boasts of his people's wealth, strength, industry, and faith in awaiting the arrival of the *mahdi*. The jinn replies: "What he says is true ... but he did not mention the sordid natures and foul tongues they have among them, nor their intercourse with their mothers, cohabiting with boys, their worship of fire ..." (128). Later, when the Persian lists all the occupations of humanity: "princes ... orators, poets ... theologians, grammarians ... scholars, jurists, philosophers," the parrot counters: "Among you too there are imposters, scoundrels, scoffers, panders, effeminates, pederasts, whores, confidence artists, liars, grave robbers, fools, boors, numbskulls, halfwits and other similar types" (166-7). Neither jinn nor bird allow humanity any unchallenged claim of excellence— either by reference to text, or to the world of experience.

The animals also manage to contest the humans in the interpretation of the material things of the world. Blessings the humans claim, seen rightly, are really afflictions. In one exchange, the Arab speaker recites a long list of the luxuries and practices available to humans as masters—and not to animals as slaves: pastries, wines, dancing, stories, jewelry, carpets and spices. "[O]ur

niceties of life are indicative of our status as masters,” he tells the judge (150). However, the nightingale (also, not coincidentally, an artist among the animals) demonstrates that the luxuries only mask the hardships humans undergo to obtain them. “[A]ll these are punishments to them, causes of painful affliction ... They gather and prepare these things by the toil of their bodies and torment of their souls, the worrying of their spirits and the sweat of their brows” (151). The nightingale counters the Arab’s list with a list of his own: “plowing ... dredging rivers, digging canals ... threshing, winnowing ... weighing, milling ... struggling and toiling to earn a living by pennies” (151). In comparison, the birds continue to inhabit an Arcadia for which humans only can long: “[o]ur food and nourishment are what spring up for us from the ground ... These the earth brings forth for us season by season and year by year, without toil ... And that is the hallmark of our freedom and nobility” (151-2). Of course, birds must labor to gather food—though they do not cultivate it. However, by reference to the vision of the natural garden that provides for humanity without labor, the Brethren use the Natural to criticize what humans claim as achievements.

Further, when humans do achieve some accomplishment in the world, frequently it is by stealing the material for it from an animal, or by imitating a practice an animal performs better. When the Iraqi shows off human use of “silk, brocade ... linen, sable ... carpets, leather cloths,” the jackals replies: “tell me, O human, would you have any of the things you boast of unless you had taken them from others, from other animals ... ?” (161). Humans steal silk from “the spittle of worms,” wool from sheep, hides from other animals. The animals, the jackal contends, are born with a suit that fits them without labor, but humans have to toil to put clothing on their backs. When the bee builds, it is a model of organization that betters similar effort by humans: “we too have knowledge and understanding, awareness, discrimination, thought, judgment, and a

capacity for ordering and governing which are keener and subtler ... more exacting than theirs” (145). The human failure to recognize their reliance on the rest of the animals for their comforts jeopardizes a common human claim to superiority. The mule scoffs:

As for the alleged superiority of your intellects—why we find not the slightest trace or sign of it, for if you had such overwhelming minds you would not have boasted against us of things which are neither your own doing nor acquired by your own efforts, but are among the manifold gifts of God. ... The intelligent take pride only in things which are their own doing. (60)

Despite claims to superiority, the human is by nature less at home in the world. Rather, humans have to steal or imitate the animal, and labor to create comfort in the world for themselves. This discomfort extends to a lack of ability to read the design of God in nature—the role of *amr*—which comes to animals without effort.

Humans’ lack of skill in understanding the order instituted by God extends even to human piety and religion. The Hebrew speaker lauds religious practice: prayer, fasts, charity, mosques, synagogues and churches, calls to prayer and pilgrimages, as indications of humanity’s superiority. However, the birds’ spokesman argues that humans need those practices because they are impious, ignorant, impure—the animals, on the other hand, “are free of sins and evils ... so we have no need of any of those things of which you boast” (156). Prophets, he argues, were sent to enlighten the ignorant, not to reward the faithful. Ritual purifications are only necessary for the unclean. “As for charity and alms tax, these were imposed upon you only because you collect a surplus of wealth ... by amassing capital by theft and larceny, fraud ... by storing up goods ... miserliness ... you amass what you do not eat and hoard what you do not need” (157). Humans have the written law, the words of the prophets, and all the practices of religion, because they are unable to free themselves from the realm of ignorant matter and attain natural reason:

revealed scriptures which make clear what is permitted and prohibited—statutes and laws—why all this exists simply to educate and civilize you on account of your blindness

of heart, your backwardness, and your paucity of awareness. ... You need teachers and instructors ... [b]ut we were inspired by God himself. (159)

The animals already enjoy a status that humans have to strive to attain: the direct knowledge of the divine law. The animals do not need the intermediary of text—of scriptures or prophets or mosques, because they already read the word of God in the world: “all directions are the *qiblah* toward which we turn in prayer. For wherever we turn our face, there is the face of God” (158).<sup>168</sup> Animals, in their obedience to *amr* as manifest in nature, are incapable of turning away from God. Law, for them, is what God ordains through nature.

For humans, on the other hand, law is an institution to be manipulated. It is a tool to be understood and employed on behalf of human interest, not a means of discerning the mind of God. In depicting a secret meeting among representatives of humankind, the Brethren take the opportunity to parody human legal practice:

“Suppose the judge decides to release [the animals] and let them go free? What do we do then?”

“We shall say,” another answered, “that the animals are our slaves and chattels, inherited from our fathers and grandfathers. It is our decision whether to free them or not.”

“And if the judge tells us to produce our title deeds, bills of sale, contracts, and witnesses attesting that they are our property, slaves inherited from our forefathers?” they asked.

“We shall say that we will call our neighbors and trustworthy persons from our homelands as witnesses.”

“But what if the judge says ... ‘Where are the deeds, contracts, and bills of sale? Produce and present them if you speak the truth?’ What then shall we say?”

No one in the assembly had an answer for that, except the Arab: “We shall say, we had these documents, but they were lost in the Flood.” (79)

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<sup>168</sup> The bird’s last line quotes Qur’an verse 2:115, which Ibn al-‘Arabi later would employ to support the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*: the oneness of being. It is a concept on which Sufi and Neoplatonic thought overlap.



As the animals in their various caucuses seek the proper argument, worry about the deployment of rhetoric, and attempt to find the way to convince the court of the justice of their cause, the human representatives begin plotting bribery and fraud.

Given the stream of calumny directed at humanity for pages on nearly every issue, it is perhaps surprising that the King of the Jinn rules, in part at least, in favor of humans. There is a sense in which humans are superior to animals: they have eternal life, and can become saints. “If we are obedient,” the Hijâzi spokesman explains, “then we shall be with the prophets ... saints, and sages, the blessed and the best, the most virtuous and great souled” (201). Humans in general are no more skilled at any practice than any creature in the animal kingdom—including discerning the word of God as manifest in text and world. However, humans can learn to be better than any animal, to have the most profound understanding of God, by conforming their will to God’s *amr*. That is: animals do not have to labor to follow God; humans do, and by that labor can come to contemplate the divine. Humans wield authority to the degree that they have freedom and are responsible for their actions. Haq explains that “as God’s regents on the earth (*Khalifat Allâh fi’ l-ard*), humans are accountable for their acts; nonhuman animals are not” (133). Humans, in short, have the capacity to achieve greatness. According to the ruling of the King of the Jinn, the animals are to return to serve humans—“in peace and security under God’s protection” (202). The Brethren do not explain the exact quality or degree of protection God extends to the animals. That is left for the humans to discover as they learn to read the law of God in scripture and world, including lessons imparted to them by nonhuman animals, with their direct experience of *amr*.

## The Animal: Word and World as Law

As shown in these works, animals are at least as much a tangle of Nature and culture as rivers and mountains. Assigned silent roles, with the exception of fables, animals become sites on which humans deploy language. In the case of *The Jungle Books*, Kipling attempts to use the animal as a pure vehicle of naturalized imperial values. However, his attempt ends up sabotaging itself, as the animal, as counter to the human, becomes the repository and agent of Law. In *The Case of the Animals versus Man*, individual spokesmen for various categories of animal demonstrate a fuller understanding of reason and law as embodied both in text and in world. Animals, in short, are better readers of the law than humans. Both works depict animals as the rightful instructors of humanity—teachers of natural law. For Kipling, this law was a shifting naturalization of grand values specifically set against the flimsy stricture humans called law. For the Brethren an ability to read *amr* as inscribed in nature is a requirement for proceeding to the study of the mind of God. The world is orderly according to the command of God, as manifest in a law that animals cannot disobey. Although animals read those orders perfectly and without textual mediation, humans must come to understanding on their own—often with the help of the natural world.

Goodman contends that the animals in the Brethren's fable make a legitimate claim to be treated as ends, "because their very existence makes a claim upon existence, a striving, as Spinoza called it, to preserve and promote their own being" (16).<sup>169</sup> In their epistle, Goodman writes, the Brethren make an imaginative leap, "to make the case that real animals might have made had they been given the gift of speech" (249). That is, humans, in identifying with the animal through text and imagination, come to sympathize with the outlook of another. The result,

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<sup>169</sup> Goodman is quoting the *Ethics*, III, prop. 7. See also Jonas: *Imperative* (op. cit.) for a discussion of the existence of living creatures making an ethical claim on humans.

Goodman suggests, is a sort of challenge to theory: “The Aesopian device of giving speaking parts to animals allows what postmodern theorists have repeatedly told us is impossible—a way of getting outside ourselves, beyond the constructs and constrictions of our familiar culture and even the natural biases of our humanity” (253-4). Goodman certainly is aware of the long literary tradition of the deployment of textual animals as mouthpieces for human desires and laws. However, a flight from human mind and civilization into pastoral embrace of the mind of the animal is not necessary. Animals in their textual depiction already demonstrate the limits of humanity by imparting a sense of what is possible for humans and what is forbidden. Animals in fiction and in the world of lived experience, as David Shumway notes, are sites displaying “the inseparability of nature and culture” (258). This is not to say that nature and culture become one thing in the animal, nor that humans can be profitably reduced to the category “animal.” After all, these differences have been recognized for some time, and with reason: the differences still hold, even if the abyss between human and animal has boundaries less well defined than they have been. The animal is necessary as an agent of law, of showing humans where to begin. Careful observation of animals in the wild can show humans a great deal about surviving outside of civilization, about how to become a good animal. In text, animals show humans how to behave in civilization; they teach humans how they can become good people.

## Chapter Five

### Pastoral Longing, Urban Misreading: *Marcovaldo* and *Into the Wild*

To one who has been long in city pent;  
'Tis very sweet to look into the fair  
and open face of heaven.  
John Keats  
"To One Who Has Been Long"

The relationship between the city and wild nature is a complicated one even in the earliest of literary works. *Gilgamesh*,<sup>170</sup> for example, starts and finishes with praise for the delights of the City of Uruk: its high walls and powerful stonework, its market activity, its religious ritual.<sup>171</sup> "Observe its walls, whose upper hem is like bronze; / behold its inner wall, which no work can equal. / Touch the stone threshold, which is ancient / ... As for its foundation, was it not laid down by the seven sages?" (Tab. I, Col. i, 10-19).<sup>172</sup> In the earliest development between the Tigris and Euphrates, cities were rare and fragile: isolated outposts of civilization in a vast, indifferent wilderness where the nonhuman held sway. A bad harvest, war, or disease in many cases meant the city's destruction. Praise for the human accomplishment in building the city of Uruk, however, also offers an early example of the urban paradox. Humans have designed and built the city, but they have done so by making use of the things of nature—cedar from the surrounding woods, lapis lazuli from the hills. In order for the city to exist, it needs the presence of wild nature to supply the resources necessary to build and sustain it. In

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<sup>170</sup> The actual title of the tablets on which the text is preserved matches with the work's first line: *Sha naqba immuru*, translated approximately as "He who saw the deep."

<sup>171</sup> The earliest Sumerian fragments, date to the late third millennium BCE. See David Damrosch's *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh*. New York: H. Holy & Co, 2006, and Jeffrey H. Tigay's *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. Philadelphia: U Penn P. 1982.

<sup>172</sup> The translation is John Gardner's.

turn, without the city as a site of human will, order, and activity, no separate wilderness is possible. All, in that case, would be wilderness. So, at least in this sense, city and wilderness each constitute the other. Sîn-Leqi-Unninnî, author of the version of *Gilgamesh* recovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was aware of this complex relation between city and the surrounding terrain. The presence of the wild-man Enkidu is necessary, after all, to civilize the brutal city-dweller Gilgamesh. However, to bring Enkidu inside the walls of Uruk requires the wiles of the urbane temple-priestess Shamhât. Together, the two heroes—natural-man and god-man—are able to defeat Humbaba, the monstrous guardian of the cedar grove.<sup>173</sup> This tale, and the tale of Gilgamesh's failed quest for immortality, is found on stone tablets under the foundation bricks of the walls of the city. The description of the city itself specifies where the text can be found, and urges the audience to take up the tablets and read them. This connection between the city and the text is as profound as that between the city and surrounding terrain. That is, the City of Uruk is constructed of natural materials, but it is also constructed of and defined by text (which itself relies on the stuff of matter—stone and reed styli—to exist).

During the millennia intervening between the composition of *Gilgamesh* and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the association of the city with text, with artifice, and therefore with the human, has taken precedence over views of the city as subject to and dependent on the material of nature. In the same period (some moments of dissolution notwithstanding) the city, as defining the realm of human authority, has come to dominate the world humans inhabit. Wilderness, in turn, has come to inhabit only tiny outposts surrounded by human development and suffered to exist only by the

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<sup>173</sup> It should be noted that when the heroes exceed the scope of their orders and kill Humbaba rather than simply defeating him in combat and then showing him mercy, the gods punish Gilgamesh and Enkidu for their wanton destruction. For more on the relation between Gilgamesh and the cedar forest, see Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.

operation of text in the form of human law. Rather than a dominating wilderness speckled with tiny regions of human civilization, notes Thomas Birch, since the late nineteenth century humans have had “only a network of wilderness reservations in which wilderness has been locked up” (142). It is against this backdrop, the dominance of humanity in urban areas, that the pastoral mode—the longing for a primal relationship with nature set against the corruption and complexity of the city—appears.<sup>174</sup> This desire to escape culture by flight into nature is by origin a function of the city, an impulse of the city dweller, and this pastoral longing is coupled with a craving for unmediated contact with nature.

This chapter considers two texts in which the primary characters try to satisfy this longing for nature: Italo Calvino’s *Marcovaldo, or The seasons in the city*,<sup>175</sup> and Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*. There is, of course, a great deal of difference between the texts. Calvino’s is a work of fiction: episodic, dark but comedic, owing much of its style to the Italy of neo-realistic film and to the work of Charlie Chaplin. Krakauer’s account, on the other hand, is nonfiction. It stems from an article he reported for *Outside* magazine in 1992,<sup>176</sup> about the disappearance and death by starvation of Christopher Johnson McCandless in Alaska just north of Denali—an article he later revisited and expanded into a book. What ties these works together is the impulse Marcovaldo and McCandless shared: the desire to encounter nature without the interference of the city, without the mediation of text. In Marcovaldo’s case, the efforts often go catastrophically, though comically, awry. In this set of fictional shorts, the mistakes are

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<sup>174</sup> This is not to suggest that the pastoral impulse originated in the nineteenth century. Though the pastoral mode or impulse is as ancient as the division between city-dweller and herdsman, its earliest forms appeared in the third century BCE with the *Idylls* of Theocritus. Chapter two of this dissertation treats the development of the pastoral at greater length.

<sup>175</sup> Italian: *Marcovaldo, ovvero, Le stagioni in città*; unless otherwise specified, all translations come from William Weaver’s 1983 edition.

<sup>176</sup> The actual article ran in January 1993, and sparked a great deal of controversy. See *Outside* issues from February through March of 1993 for responses from readers.

redeemed by comedy and occasionally surrealism. Krakauer, on the other hand, is constrained by history. McCandless died, and there is nothing the writer can do to make the story a comic one. In the case of Chris McCandless, the willful renunciation of the trappings of civilization—of map, compass, guidebook—also goes catastrophically awry, with fatal consequences. Despite some critical assessments that find in Marcovaldo a man of the country, in tune with natural rhythms, this chapter maintains that his longing for contact with nature, like that of McCandless, is characteristic of the city-dweller.

The difference for the two figures operates not only in result, but in intent: Marcovaldo seeks natural beauty in the landscape of fictional Arcadia. Krakauer and his subject, on the other hand, long for the sublime in the wilderness—both real and imagined—of Alaska. Both visions of nature, in a sense, are real. Both, in a sense, are fictional, and have never existed. A brief discussion of the urban foundation of pastoral longing begins this chapter, followed by a discussion of the two texts. In exploring the fictional character of Marcovaldo and the nonfiction portrait Krakauer draws of Chris McCandless, the chapter considers the impulse to jettison culture in favor of nature—both imagined and encountered—and the consequences for those who succeed.

### **The City and the Wild: Longing for Contact**

Though it gradually moved further and further away, the pastoral began in close proximity to the city. “The pastoral landscape of Theocritus had been immediate and close at hand: just outside the walls of the city,” observes Raymond Williams, adding that the proximity did not last long. The pastoral soon came to occupy an infinitely distant space, accessible only in literature: “A transmutation occurs, in some parts of Virgil, in which the landscape becomes more distant, becomes in fact Arcadia” (17). That is, while Nature receded into a fictional

horizon, the city became ever more the site of contact with the everyday world of experience. For increasing numbers of people, daily experience with the nonhuman world occurs in an environment shaped by humans (even if the materials remain, at some distant point in the chain, the stuff of uncreated nature). Manuel DeLanda notes that urbanization has not been a steady process, however. Rather, it is subject to fluctuations and reversal over time: “As city historians often point out, urbanization has always been a discontinuous phenomenon. Bursts of rapid growth are followed by long periods of stagnation” (29).<sup>177</sup> In his 2009 study *European Cities and Towns, 400-2000*, Peter Clark suggests that the urbanizing process began in a period impossible to document precisely: “Cities date from the mists of time, when definitions of what we mean by a town are often quite problematic. Nonetheless, it looks as if the first cities evolved in the Middle East as a result of advances in irrigation, agriculture, and trade” (15).<sup>178</sup> After the medieval period, according to Clark, Europe has become, and has remained (despite economic and demographic fluctuations) an urbanized continent. The United States, as heir to an array of European traditions and practices, also quickly became a primarily urban nation. According to Donald Worster, more than half the U.S. population became urban sometime around 1915. Twentieth-century America, he writes, is “almost completely artificial” (*American Environmentalism* 2).

The city is the center of this artificiality, of course, set as it is against unmodified nature, which may now be all but impossible to find. In much of the United States, for example, even

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<sup>177</sup> See Louis Mumford’s *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and its Prospects*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961. Also valuable is Hohenberg, Paul M. and Lynn Hollen Lees. *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000-1950*.

<sup>178</sup> Clark traces the earliest cities to Sumeria in about 3200 BCE, then Babylon at about 1800, then Phoenicia from 1200 to 700. Aegean development started after about 1450, according to Clark, and was linked to long-distance trade.



stretches of unoccupied terrain have been set on a township and range grid.<sup>179</sup> In many cities, the system has had as much effect on the planning and development of the U.S. city as any aspects of the terrain on which the city stands. Sam Bass Warner, Jr. describes the U.S. standard cityscape:

Today in most parts of the nation the pedestrian or motorist moves along straight lines bordered by rows of shade trees. Ahead is a distant horizon, not a wall of buildings that gives him a sense of urban enclosure. Flanking him are rows of small buildings, usually wooden, freestanding, and set back from the street by lawns. This standard visual environment, compounded of the commonplace tradition of wooden house construction and the constraints of the rectangular survey, is our visual heritage. It is the townscape we repeat over and over on a slightly expanded scale, and with surprisingly few modifications, in the suburbs of megalopolis. (21)

In this description, Warner evokes what Deleuze calls “the striated space par excellence” (481), a place that in many cases was brought into being along lines already inscribed on the terrain, without regard to land features or actual inhabitants. The city matches the grid, rather than vice-versa. Though humans planned and built these places, individual people frequently have but little effect on the cities in which they may find themselves. Rather, notes DeLanda, cities “limit them and control them, or, on the contrary... set them in motion or accelerate their mutation” (29). It is important to note that for Deleuze the city does not automatically condemn its residents to a striated life; nomads in the city can generate smooth space “off the grid,” so to speak: “[T]he differences are not objective: it is possible to live striated on the deserts, steppes, or seas; it is possible to live smooth even in the cities, to be an urban nomad” (482).

In shaping the city, or adapting to the contours of the city in which one finds oneself, occasionally people enlist the natural in the furthering of the artificial. They bring nature into the city in material and textual form. James Machor traces the impulse in the United States toward

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<sup>179</sup> As explained earlier, a township is six square miles subdivided into squares of 640 acres. See chapter 2.

what he has dubbed the “pastoral city,” an “urban-pastoral vision [which] conceives of an alternate ‘middle’ realm in which the city blends harmoniously with the countryside or contains within its own boundaries urbanity, complexity, and sophistication combined with the physical or social attributes of simple rusticity” (14). That is, in such a pastoral city residents of the city would have means of encountering nature while retaining the cultural benefits of living in town. This urban pastoralism, argues Machor, operates as a deep ideological structure or myth—the shared belief that it is a good thing to have access to green space within urban environments (16).<sup>180</sup> In paradoxical conjunction with urbanization (and suburbanization) in the United States is the cultural insistence that “the good life” is to be found in rural or even wilderness settings.<sup>181</sup> One of the results, notes Machor, is the development of massive, sprawling suburbs surrounding the old city centers in the United States. These suburbs constitute “a compromised form of urban pastoralism,” Machor notes, in which their residents seek contact with a city on the condition they can withdraw from it every evening (212). The results are predictable: traffic, sprawl, and the abandonment of the city center as anything other than a business and occasional entertainment district. Warner draws particular attention to the role zoning laws have played in developing the suburbs and conditioning the city center. The New York Zoning Law of 1916, he notes, was so effective in keeping garment lofts off Fifth Avenue that in the following decade nearly 600 cities adopted it similar laws to “[give] suburbanites a defense against ‘undesirable’ activities and people” (31). Zoning law favoring single-family homes on one-acre lots (as

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<sup>180</sup> Machor notes that Pierre L’Enfant’s design for Washington D.C., President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “greenbelt towns,” Henry Ford’s call for 50 thousand gardens in Detroit, and Frank Lloyd Wright’s urban park designs all indicate a desire for the synthesis of the natural and the built as essential to human well being (5-7).

<sup>181</sup> See Machor, 6, where he mentions advertising, the flight of affluent urbanites to the countryside, and the back-to-nature movements of the 1960s. To these examples might also be added such phenomena as “reality” shows such as “Survivorman,” “Man vs. Wild,” and the game show, “Survivor.”

opposed to multifamily housing on quarter-acres lots), Warner writes, effectively enforced segregation by race and income (32). With the dwindling of true wilderness or open country to develop (along with those capable or desirous of settling it), Machor observes, city dwellers found a way to “[fashion] alternative cities in a symbolic ‘west’—the environs of existing cities” (212).

The tension between city and suburb has rested on another way city dwellers allow wilderness into the city: through text—in this case the narrative that urban centers constitute corrupt, violent, “urban wilderness.” Robert Pogue Harrison writes of this process that “cities become like forests in the figurative sense—places of spiritual solitude where savagery lurks in the hearts of men and women” (13). As true wild terrain has become increasingly difficult to encounter in the United States, writes Andrew Light, its legacy has been applied to the city: “The metaphorical legacy of classical wilderness is the claim that urban areas are a sort of wilderness” (140). In some literature and film, Light observes, the demonic urban wilderness is set against the orderly suburbs and “safe” neighborhoods.<sup>182</sup> It must be kept separate, and wise city-dwellers shun it, not only for its physical dangers, but also because, as the deep forest does to Hawthorne’s Young Goodman Brown, its evil may taint them (139). Michael Bennett notes that “the glorification of wild nature at the expense of urban ecosystems can, purposefully or inadvertently, feed into the assault on American cities” (173).<sup>183</sup> This textual introduction of the

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<sup>182</sup> For examples in film, see *Brazil* (1985), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Grand Canyon* and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Falling Down* (1993), *Traffic* (2000), and *Crash* (2004). The trope is especially common in action movies. The classics include *The Warriors* (a 1979 adaptation of the *Anabasis*, in which a betrayed street gang must find its way back to its home turf), *Escape From New York* (1981), Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and more recently Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006).

<sup>183</sup> Bennet also cites Stephen N. Haymes in observing that in some quarters the word “urban” is enjoying a vogue as synonym for black (and in some cases Latino or Chicano) and poor (174).

wild into the city serves several purposes. First, it is a way of animalizing humans, giving a textual basis (a pretext) for treating certain humans as bestial residents of the wild to be conquered, rather than civilized residents of the city to whom we must be neighborly. Second, it justifies what Andrew Ross calls the “parasitical” relationship of suburb to city (since suburbanites drain revenue and political power from cities even as the urban centers offer jobs and recreation to residents of the suburbs) (18).<sup>184</sup> Last, it allows the suburbs to be cast as the peaceful middle existence: garden spots free of chaotic wilderness both inside and outside of city limits. Ross is right to argue that the “severe toll” taken on the cities and on the environment due to suburban development owes a great deal to “a half century of racist propaganda...depicting the dangers of city-center life” (19). However, some of the drive to abandon the city may also be due to a continuing tendency in U.S. arts and literature: “Even our most urbane artists have made the impulse to withdraw from society into an idealized rural landscape a cardinal theme of their works, suggesting that a more meaningful life is possible closer to nature beyond the constraining, complex, and corrupt city” writes Machor (3).<sup>185</sup> In any case, Machor notes, the tension between city and suburb is simply another development in a very old division: “the dichotomy between the corrupt, overcivilized, yet disordered city and the redeemed urban society integrated with nature” (211).

However, humans cannot quarantine nature simply by planning and shaping a city. Metropolitan areas—including suburbs, whose garden balance often tilts away from

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The work cited is Haymes’s *Race, Culture, and the City: A Pedagogy for Black Urban Struggle*. Albany: State U New York P, 1995.

<sup>184</sup> in Bennett and Teague

<sup>185</sup> One should note, however, that Machor also mentions a competing strain in American literature, which revels in the “rich diversity and interesting complexity” of urban life (3). Machor mentions in particular: Whitman, Hawthorne, Cooper, Sandburg, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hart Crane and Dreiser, among others. It is perhaps no real surprise that some of these writers are both critics and advocates of the city in their work.

equilibrium—are not as antiseptic, as free of wild nature as they sometimes are portrayed. Rather, nature continually finds ways to erode the boundary between city and wilderness, whether humans intend it or not. In any unused space, neglected even for a moment, natural relations sometimes go “off script.” Wildflowers bloom in the untended space between Interstate buffers and subdivisions. Deer graze along suburban roads. After Hurricane Katrina, flocks of escaped parrots made their home in the palm trees of New Orleans. Rather than viewing the city as a homogenous whole, it is perhaps more accurate to view spaces within the city as they move along a continuum between greater development or greater disintegration. Within the city, the state of any particular space is never static, observes Robert Pogue Harrison: “The Forum became wild pasture land for Dark Age cattle. Wilderness overgrew the roads that led to Rome. The work of history fell to the ground it had tried to surmount under the auspices of god” (13). That is, where humans look away, wilderness expands. For Thomas Birch, the cultivation of these spaces of urban nature is essential to an understanding of the relation between the wild and the civilized: “mini-wildernesses, pocket-wildernesses in every schoolyard, old roadbeds, wild plots in suburban yards, flower boxes in urban windows, cracks in the pavement, field, farm, home, and workplace, all the ubiquitous ‘margins’” (156). William Cronon calls the tendency to see nature as only existing outside of the areas humans have developed part of “the problem with wilderness.” The tree in the garden or park is as deserving of respect as the tree in the primordial forest, Cronon writes. This is not to devalue the primordial redwood, but to elevate the status of the landscape yew: “Nature is all around us if we only have eyes to see it” (22). For Timothy Morton, that nature that surrounds people in the city requires the same care as the nature humans envision through lists of endangered creatures, Sierra Club calendars, and documentaries on The Discovery Channel. We must learn to love the poisoned rainforest, which, if it could speak,

“would sound like Frankenstein’s creature” (195). It is humans’ job to acknowledge the world they have made and care for it—rather than imagining a purer one, and caring for that instead. Or, as Cronon explains it, “by imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit” (17).

However, for some people, the presence of manicured lawns and city parks, the cultivation of community gardens and patches of weeds near the railroad tracks, the appreciation for the natural resourcefulness of pigeons, roaches, and squirrels simply is not enough. They desire an unmediated, primal encounter with nature—a nature that has not been bent wholly to human will. In these instances a walk in the pastoral garden will not suffice—only an encounter with the wilderness, a natural terrain pure and free from human domination, can serve. This longing not for a comfortable, idyllic natural embrace but for hardship and challenge by wild and indifferent nature is termed elsewhere in this study as the “dyspastoral.” It is a longing for contact with nature that seeks the sublime encounter with wilderness rather than the beautiful encounter with the garden.<sup>186</sup> Part of the reaction stems, no doubt, from the sheer magnitude of the urban terrain. As Warner explains: “The sheer size and extent of our cities overwhelms us. The interminable streets of houses, stores, offices, and factories, the incongruity between slums and suburbs, the intimidation of giant office towers, the flood of traffic, the infinity of government offices engender a sense of powerlessness” (55). This vast urban network has only expanded over the past century and a half, explains Warner—the cities themselves growing, the number of cities increasing, and the connections between them intensifying (57). The result, writes Onno Oerlemans, is a city blocking out the terrain: “The urban landscape then fails to cohere, to offer meaning, and buildings come to speak only of their existence as formed

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<sup>186</sup> The dyspastoral is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

substance” (177). The dream of union with nature becomes impossible, writes Malchor, “dominated by the image of a modern America as an omnipresent city” (212). The greater the domination of the city, the more profound desire, perhaps, to escape its control.

However, this longing for escape from culture into a realm of unmediated natural experience is fraught with peril. The dream of pristine wilderness, writes Cronon, is almost entirely a function of the city, a privilege of urbanites who have no experience with the physically and spiritually demanding labor of working land to survive (80). Cronon also contends that there is no pure wilderness for anyone to encounter, however profound one’s longing:

“[N]ature” is not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead it is a profoundly human construction. This is not to say that the nonhuman world is somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations—far from it. But the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. (25)

Morton identifies the desire to escape culture for pure subjective contact with nature with Hegel’s “beautiful soul”—“Hegel’s notion of pure consciousness without content” (131). Nature, for the beautiful soul, becomes “a way of healing what modern society has damaged...Contact with nature, and with the aesthetic, will mend the bridge between subject and object” (22). The key in this case, argues Morton, is the choice between “authenticity” and “selling out”—between engagement with the world one encounters, and remaining pure, untainted by that world. “This is ironic, because the ultimate hypocrite, claims Hegel, is the beautiful soul itself, which cannot see that the evil it condemns is intrinsic to its existence—indeed its very form as pure subjectivity is this evil. The chasm cannot be fully bridged; not, at any rate, without compromising the beauty of the soul itself” (118). At best, the pursuit of contact between pure subjectivity and a pure

world risks ending up where it began—in the mind of the subject. At worst, the encounter requires the sullyng or destruction of the beautiful soul itself.

Chris McCandless exemplifies a version of Morton and Hegel’s beautiful soul—in search of a pure encounter with the wild, and committed to his vision of living deliberately, authentically, with only what he finds necessary. Marcovaldo, too, seeks an authentic encounter with the natural, only to find himself repeatedly thrown back into the inauthentic and artificial. As Robert Watson observes: “Pastoral yearning—like the Renaissance arts and sciences—is haunted by Zeno’s paradox, by the tantalizing approach that never quite becomes an encounter, eventually exhausting the hapless racer with the recognition that his task is impossible; a recognition that only becomes clear when the race seems nearly won” (68). Marcovaldo recognizes the many ways nature makes incursions into the circumscribed realm of the city. However, he reads nature poorly, and does not know how to respond when he happens upon these incursions. Marcovaldo’s journeys in search of nature begin with the city, move through an imagined wilderness pastoral, and end up exactly where they started—still in the city, a little worse, perhaps, for the wear. McCandless, like Gilgamesh, leaves his city in search of eternity, immortality. Marcovaldo just wants to see some stars.

### ***Marcovaldo: Longing for Pastoral***

Italo Calvino wrote the 20 vignettes that constitute *Marcovaldo* over the course of a decade, from the early 1950s to the 1960s. The stories ran first as serials before being published together—first as the ten stories of *I racconti* (1958); the larger collection of 20 stories was published in 1963.<sup>187</sup> In the “Author’s note” accompanying the English text, Calvino indicates that the tales occur “in an industrial city of northern Italy.” The city is never identified, but in the

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<sup>187</sup> For the publishing history of *Marcovaldo*, see Hume, Markey, and Olken (op. cit.)



early stories it represents a “very poor Italy, the Italy of neo-realistic movies.” The later stories, which date from the mid-1960s, depict a northern Italian city operating “under the illusions of an economic boom.” The question of appearance and reality is an important one in these stories, and from the start, Calvino indicates that the prosperity is a dream, an illusion. The city, and the poverty, is real.<sup>188</sup> Without using the proper names of any sites in any actual Italian city, Calvino constructs a sort of anti-Arcadia—a fictional city with all the trappings of a real one. As Arcadia counts on streams and trees, so Marcovaldo’s city has barren rooftops, grimy streets, obnoxious neon signs. The site Calvino describes is recognizable due to its urban verisimilitude. However, it is not identifiable. It exists, like Arcadia, only in text. This counter- or anti-Arcadia is an important indication of Calvino’s project, which concerns a desire and a series of quests for an encounter with nature that never has existed. By setting the stories in an unidentifiable city with all the urban signs, Calvino from the start sets out his parodic intent with respect to the pastoral, which performs the same act with garden and wilderness settings.

The urban laborer, the agent of Calvino’s parody, has been the subject of much critical discussion. Noting that his name makes him an exception to Calvino’s anonymous characters of this period, Markey interprets Marcovaldo as a sort of Italian version of Thurber’s Walter Mitty: “a gentle, amiable, but impoverished blue-collar worker whose fantasy life exceeds the small, cramped realm of his city apartment” (13).<sup>189</sup> Marcovaldo, Markey writes, “is hardly a hero.” Rather, he is “like many Italian workers of the fifties...a modern-day migrant, at heart a small-town rustic living awkwardly in the big city” (52). Marcovaldo is at once a “chaplinesque” figure

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<sup>188</sup> A possibility for Marcovaldo’s home is a city much like Milan, which was on its way to becoming the center of the primary manufacturing region in Italy, and the economic capital, during the 1950s and 1960s. The city’s population in 1950 was 1.4 million people. See Hohenberg and Lees, pp. 220-228 (op. cit.).

<sup>189</sup> Markey observes that Calvino employs a version of mock-epic in naming his protagonist. “Marcovaldo” is the name of a giant Orlando slays in Luigi Pulci’s *Morgante* (133, n. 6).

(13, 50), and “an existential misfit” (52). I.T. Olken also highlights Marcovaldo’s status as a dreamer, noting (119) that in his Introduction, Calvino writes that Marcovaldo dreams of returning to a state of nature.<sup>190</sup> Where this dream comes from is open to much speculation. Olken identifies Marcovaldo, despite his haplessness in his encounters with nature, as “not, after all, ‘un uomo di città.’” Rather, “[w]e do know that his perception, his deeper orientation to the world, is that of ‘un uomo di campagna’” (120). Olken is correct to observe that Marcovaldo is never at ease in the city, and he is forever trying to find a way to escape it. However, Olken overlooks that the longing for pastoral is not at all a function of the country laborer or pioneer. Rather, it is a mode of the town or city-dweller.<sup>191</sup> After all, a true man of the country would harbor no fantasies about the ease and pleasure of the true pastoral life—life, that is, among real herdsmen (“Un viaggio con le mucche [A journey with the cows]”). Nor would a man familiar with rural nature mistake a paint-blue river for untainted water (“Dov’è più azzurro il fiume [Where the river is more blue?]”). Olken attempts to account for Marcovaldo’s lack of nature-savvy by asking: “Has the time spent in the city erased his storehouse of country lore? Has he never known the difference between good and bad mushrooms? Has his greed blurred his natural instincts? Or do all growing things undergo corruption in the noxious atmosphere of the city?” (121). The point, however, is not the source of Marcovaldo’s knowledge—or ignorance—about mushrooms. If one does not know how to read nature’s signs carefully, one is likely to make wretched mistakes in interpretation. Mushrooms grow in city and field alike. The opportunity to poison oneself with them is as present in one setting as the other. Marcovaldo’s dream of a nature that reaches out to him, to embrace him and nourish him, is the old dream of Arcadia: a

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<sup>190</sup> *sogna il ritorno a uno stato di natura* (“Presentazione” vii)

<sup>191</sup> Calvino, too, notes that “L’amore per la natura di Marcovaldo è quello che può nascere solo in un uomo di città (Marcovaldo’s love of nature is the kind that could be born only in a man of the city [translation mine])” (ix).

longing for a textual Nature that exists only by virtue of literature generated in the city. Arcadian mushrooms are one thing; real mushrooms quite another.

It is clear that, as Markey indicates, Calvino “undoubtedly meant to examine, through his protagonist’s eyes, the changing rapport between man and nature in our era of environmental abuses” (52). This rapport according to Markey, Hume, and Franco Ricci, seems fated to end in disaster, even despair.<sup>192</sup> Too frequently “and too uncomfortably, the reader sees Marcovaldo precipitously poised on the edge of some trivial disaster, a beggar snatching at scraps of happiness, an innocent who falls victim to sudden reversal whenever his slim fantasies collide with the larger indecipherable events around him” (53). However, it is also possible that Calvino is showing how Marcovaldo is having real experience with what Thoreau calls “the *actual* world.” Marcovaldo’s real world is *urban*. It is polluted—a land of billboards, crowded beaches, and rivers tainted by industrial waste. This actual world steadfastly refuses to acquiesce to Marcovaldo’s fantasy of contact with pure nature. When he seeks it, he finds the city—for all practical purposes, his whole world. Calvino’s collection of fables undercuts Arcadia, showing how the city interferes with Nature, how nature infiltrates the city, and how the things of the city itself become a second nature for Marcovaldo.

Though it is not the first, the story most central to Calvino’s counter-pastoral project is “Un viaggio con le mucche (A journey with cows).” It begins with a catalogue of the city soundscape of the very late night or very early morning in the summer: voices, clicking heels, the policeman’s bicycle. Then Marcovaldo hears bells “e pure un corto muggito (and also a brief

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<sup>192</sup> Hume notes that Franco Ricci “speaks of the ennui that permeates the ‘*racconti*’, and sees man’s attempts to establish meaningful relations with the world as futile.” See: “Introversion and Effacement in *I Racconti* of Italo Calvino,” *Italica* 63.4: 331-45.

lowing)” (51; trans. 46).<sup>193</sup> After multiple attempts to encounter the natural world in the city, it comes to him on the darkened streets of his neighborhood: “Era una mandria come ne attraversano nottetempo la città, al principio dell’estate, andando verso le montagne per l’alpeggio (It was the sort of herd that used to cross the city at night, in early summer, going towards the mountains for the alpine pasture)” (51; 46). The animals smell of the pastoral, not entirely idealized:

[L]e mucche si portavano dietro il loro odore di strame e di fiori di campo e latte ed il languido suono dei campani, e la città pareva non toccarle, già assorto com’erano dentro il loro mondo di prati umidi, nebbie montane e guadi di torrenti. (The cows brought with them the odor of dung, wild flowers, milk and the languid sound of their bells, and the city seemed not to touch them, already absorbed as they were into their world of damp meadows, mountain mists and the fords of streams.) (51-52; 46-7)

The cows come literally from another world—one alien to Marcovaldo, both literally pastoral, the realm of shepherds, and also the realm of pristine nature, of mountain mists and streams. The city seems not to touch them because they inhabit not only this real world of dung and milk, but a world of text, a fictional world of nature and ease. For the cowherds, on the other hand, the passage through the city is profoundly uncomfortable. They “s’affannavano in brevi, inutili corse a fianco della fila, alzando i bastoni ed esplodendo in voci aspirate e rotte (wore themselves out in brief, futile dashes along the side of the line, raising their sticks and bursting out in broken, guttural cries)” (52; 47) These shepherds are Marcovaldo’s spiritual brethren—as uneasy in the city as he is. They desire nothing more than to get through it as quickly as they may. The children, who awake with Marcovaldo to watch the herd pass, ask the sort of questions one might expect of children who have never seen cattle:

le mucche sono come i tram? Fanno le fermate? Dov’è il capolinea delle mucche? ... Si mettono gli sci? ... E non gli fanno la multa se sciupano i prati? (Are cows like trams? Do

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<sup>193</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by William Weaver. For ease of reference I will cite page numbers for original first, followed by those from the English translation.

they have stops? (Where's the beginning of the cows' line? ... Can they wear skis? ... Don't they get fined if they trample the grass?) (52; 47)

Before Marcovaldo is aware, his eldest son Michelino has disappeared, having decided to follow the herd.

What follows is the clearest critique Calvino makes of the pastoral myth in this collection. When Marcovaldo reports Michelino's disappearance, the police officer replies: "Sarà andato in montagna, a farsi la villeggiatura, beato lui. Vedrai, tornerà grasso e abbronzonato. (He's probably gone off to the mountains for a summer holiday, lucky kid. Don't worry: he'll come back all tanned and fattened up.)" (53; 48). It seems the vision of shepherds reclining on the sward between swapping songs and chasing nymphs extends even to the police. Marcovaldo, certainly, is not immune to the vision's charm:

Marcovaldo nella polverosa calura cittadina andava col pensiero al suo figlio fortunato, che adesso certo passava le ore all'ombra d'un abete, zuffolando con una foglia d'erba in bocca, guardando giù le mucche muoversi lente per il prato, e ascoltando nell'ombra della valle un fruscio d'acque. (In the dusty city heat Marcovaldo kept thinking of his lucky son, who now was surely spending his hours in a fir tree's shade, whistling with a wisp of grass in his mouth, looking down at the cows moving slowly over the meadow, and listening to the murmur of waters in the shadows of the valley.) (53; 48)

The scene itself is not implausible. That is, it is not an excessive portrayal of pastoral ease. If one knew little about the life of a cowherd, it might seem reasonable to expect one to have a moment or two to rest. The sight of the mountain in the distance sends him into a small reverie, in which he envisions "fronde d'aceri e castagni, e ronzare api selvatiche, e Michelino lassù, pigro e felice, tra il latte e il miele e le more de siepe (maple and chestnut fronds glinting...[hears] wild bees buzzing, and Michelino up there, lazy and happy, among milk and honey and blackberry thickets)" (54; 48). This is, of course, a highly idealized version of the life of a herdsman. There is a lack of poetry and dancing, and song-competitions, but the life is imagined to be, of course,

considerably easier than it is. Marcovaldo's vision of the life of the herdsmen is conditioned by the stifling urban environment he inhabits, and fed by his dreams of open air and clean water.

The vision is no less false, however, than any classical pastoral. Michelino returns in much the same way he departed, at the dead of night, departing from the herd as it passes through the city. On arrival, he is exhausted, "dazed," nodding off as he rides a cow through the city. He confirms that it was beautiful in the mountains, but then he makes clear that his life was not especially easy or pleasant:

— Lavoravo come un mulo, — disse, e sputò davanti a sè. S'era fatta una faccia da uomo. — Ogni sera spostare i secchi ai mungitori da una bestia all'altra, da una bestia all'altra, y poi vuotarli nei bidoni, in fretta, sempre più in fretta, fino a tardi. E al mattino presto, rotolare i bidoni fino ai camion che li portano in città... E contare, contare sempre: le bestie, i bidoni, guai se si sbagliava...

...

Sempre qualcosa da fare. Per il latte, le lettiere, il letame. E tutto per che cose? Con la scusa che non avevo il contratto di lavoro, quanto m'hanno pagato? Una miseria.

("I worked like a mule," he said, and spat on the ground. He now had a man's face. "carrying the buckets to the milkers every evening, from one cow to the next, and then emptying them into the cans, in a hurry, always in a worse hurry, until late. And then early in the morning, rolling the cans down to the trucks that take them to the city. And counting...always counting: the cows, the cans, and if you made a mistake there was trouble

...

"Always something to be done. The milk. The bedding, the dung. And all for what? With the excuse that I didn't have a work contract, what did they pay me? Practically nothing...") (54-5; 49)

Michelino offers a glimpse into the true pastoral life: hard work, exhaustion, nonstop labor, and no real separation from the city, which is always present in the form of the milk trucks waiting for the giant milk cans. In addition, not only is there hard work, but there, too, is the problem of exploitative wages. Working in the meadows with the cows exposes the unskilled worker to much the same sort of shortchanging Marcovaldo likely endures at his work in the city. Through Michelino's adventure (much like those of his father), Calvino shows there were reasons, after

all, that city populations grew as rural ones declined. Country labor can be grindingly dull, horrifically difficult, and poorly-paid. The dream of the pastoral idyll does not survive contact with actual pastoral life—a life connected inseparably to the economic, day to day existence of the city. Michelino escapes the city to the realm of the pastoral, only to wind up back in the city, having received a little money in exchange for being forced to abandon the dream vision of pastoral life.

The city repeatedly interferes not only with Marcovaldo's dreams of an encounter with nature, but also his efforts to put those dreams into practice. In the early story, "La villeggiatura in panchina (Park-bench vacation)" and the later "Luna e Gnac (Moon and GNAC)," Calvino shows how an effort to follow pastoral—even wilderness—practice in an urban environment meets with the inevitable obstacle presented by the economic and physical operation of the city. In this case, as in the "Journey with cows," the dream of relief from the city by escaping into nature does not survive contact with actual (though still fictional, of course) nature. In the first story, Marcovaldo dreams of turning the local city park into a wilderness idyll not by changing its surrounding environment (an impossibility, after all), but simply by treating it as one. He couches his dream in the language of escape, even if only temporary, from the stifling demands of his life in the city:

Alzava l'occhio tra le fronde degli ippocastani, dov'erano più folte e solo lasciavano dardeggiare gialli raggi nell'ombra trasparente di linfa, ed ascoltava il chiaso dei passerini stonati ed invisibili sui rami. A lui parevano usignoli; e si diceva: "Oh, potessi destarmi una volta al cinguettare degli uccelli e non al suono della sveglia e all strillo del neonato Paolino e all'inveire di mia moglie Domitilla! ... oh, potessi vedere foglie e cielo aprendo gli occhi!" (He raised his eyes among the boughs of the horse-chestnuts, where they were at their thickest and allowed yellow rays only to glint in the shade transparent with sap; and he listened to the racket of the sparrows, tone-deaf, invisible on the branches. To him they seemed nightingales, and he said to himself: "Oh, if I could wake just once at the twitter of birds and not at the sound of the alarm and the crying of little Paolino and the

yelling of my wife, Domitilla!<sup>194</sup>... Oh, if I could see leaves and sky on opening my eyes!”) (7; 5)

Marcovaldo, however, is not content to continue simply wishing. Dreaming of a night under the stars on a park bench in the open air—after all the only “natural” environment afforded him—Marcovaldo brings his bedding to a “remote, half-hidden bench” under a canopy of horse-chestnut trees. Instead of an empty bench, however, he finds two lovers on it. They are fighting, and, as Calvino’s narrator remarks in an aside, “when lovers start to quarrel there’s no telling how long it will go on” (6).<sup>195</sup>

While he waits, Marcovaldo goes to admire the moon, which he compares to a blinking yellow traffic light. The descriptive comparison draws heavily on the pastoral mode:

La luna col suo pallore misterioso, giallo anch’esso, ma in fondo verde e anche azzurro, e il semaforo con quel suo gialletto volgare. E la luna, tutta calma, irradiante la sua luce senza fretta, venata ogni tanto di sottili resti di nubi, che lei con maestà si lasciava cadere alle spalle; e il semaforo intanto sempre lì accendi e spegni, accendi e spegni, affannoso, falsamente vivace, stanco e schiavo. (The moon with her mysterious pallor, also yellow, but also green, in its depths, and even blue; the traffic light with its common little yellow. And the moon, all calm, casting her light without haste, streaked now and then by fine wisps of clouds which she majestically allowed to fall around her shoulders; and the traffic-light meanwhile, always there, on and off, on and off, throbbing with a false vitality, but actually weary and enslaved.) (9; 7)

The personification of the moon is actually a deification. The moon is Diana: complex, aloof, majestic, clothed in fine clouds, proceeding regally, without haste, truly alive, in Marcovaldo’s sight. The traffic light, on the other hand is the emissary of the grind of daily city life, falsely vital, “weary and enslaved.” In her analysis of this passage, Markey contends that “[the moon’s] pallid color offers no better sense of well-being, as she is too aloof and inexplicable, representing

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<sup>194</sup> It is perhaps no mistake that Calvino employs this name for Marcovaldo’s wife, suggestive as it is of the “*domus*” or dwelling, and the monster Godzilla (who first appeared on-screen in 1954). And, perhaps, the Emperor Domitian.

<sup>195</sup> The exchange between the nameless lovers is comic in its pettiness: “Why won’t you admit it?” “I’ll never admit it.”... “You admit it then?” “No, no, I don’t admit it in the least!”



a higher order, more remote and even less knowable than the mechanical contrivances around him” (54). The moon, as Markey notes, does indeed represent a higher order, but that higher order is no more aloof and inaccessible in the city than it is in the country. The moon is something for Marcovaldo to desire—a contact with this other order that somehow would preserve its mystery, complexity, and majesty. Calvino is lampooning the longing for such a pastoral experience in a world in which natural respites only exist through human intervention. The pastoral, after all, is a fiction—as is the vision of the moon as a goddess, but it is perhaps overstating the case to suggest that such conceptions are incapable of providing comfort.

Marcovaldo turns at first to the man-made to create his pastoral bower. When the blinking yellow traffic light keeps him awake, he blocks it out by hanging an old commemorative wreath on the sabre of a general’s statue. When the excruciating noise of a team of workmen welding a broken portion of tram tracks disturbs him, he turns on the park’s fountain, creating an artificial *locus amoenus*, complete with woods and stream. The fountain itself is a pastoral mockery: “illustre opera di scultura e d’idraulica, con ninfe, fauni, dèi fluviali (a distinguished work of sculpture and hydraulics, with nymphs, fauns, river gods)” (12; 10). Finally, when the stink from the garbage collectors’ truck wakes him, he digs up a clump of buttercups to bury his nose in. The narrator notes that although Marcovaldo could extract very little perfume from the “almost odorless” flowers “ma già la fragranza di rugiada, di terra e d’erba pesta era un gran balsamo ([s]till the fragrance of dew, of earth, and of trampled grass was already a great balm)” (14; 11). At last, in contact with a tiny portion of nature—the buttercups he has scavenged from the park in order to hide the stench of garbage—Marcovaldo actually finds relief, fulfills a portion of his dream, and falls asleep. Unfortunately, it is dawn. The operation of the city largely has thwarted his project, but even against the omnipresence of urban

intrusions, Marcovaldo was able to salvage a tiny moment of kinship with a portion of the natural world. The handful of buttercups finally blocks out the city, affording Marcovaldo a comic, contrived, but no less true moment of respite from his urban surroundings. It takes acts of minor vandalism, guerrilla commandeering of a public fountain, and flowers up his nose, but for a brief moment he achieves it.

A similar effort to block out the city is the central concern of “Moon and GNAC,” the title of which refers to the last four letters of a neon advertisement for “SPAARK-COGNAC” on the roof across from Marcovaldo’s building. The sign alternates between twenty seconds of illumination and twenty seconds of darkness, but only the last four letters are visible from Marcovaldo’s apartment. When the GNAC lights up

La luna improvvisamente sbiadiva, il cielo diventava uniformemente nero e piatto, le stelle perdevano il brillio, e i gatti e le gatte che da dieci secondi lanciavano gnaulii d’amore ... s’acquattavano sulle tegole a pelo ritto. (The moon suddenly faded, the sky became a flat, uniform black, the stars lost their radiance, and the cats, male and female, that for ten seconds had been letting out howls of love... squatted on the tiles, their fur bristling.) (78; 71)

The artificial text in this story reduces nature to invisible background. As embodied by the neon advertisement, the operation of the city not only blocks out the moon and the stars, but in doing so it cripples the possibility of love. Moon and stars, after all, have been key elements in the literature of love for millennia. In the course of the story, Calvino makes the connection between nature and romance explicit: Marcovaldo’s daughter, Isolina “si sentiva trasportata per il chiar di luna (felt carried away by moonlight)” (78; 71). In the interstices between the neon assault, Marcovaldo’s son, Fiordaligi, carries on a flirtation with a “ragazza color di luna ... color di luce nella notte (moon colored girl...the color of light in the night)” who smiles at him from the opposite block of apartments before the artificial light obscures her (79; 72). Oblivious to the romantic longing of his elder children, Marcovaldo has another project: “In mezzo a questa

tempesta di passioni, Marcovaldo cercava d'insegnare ai figlioli la posizione dei corpi celesti (In the midst of this storm of passions, Marcovaldo was trying to teach his children the positions of the celestial bodies)" (79; 72). The children, as they do with the cattle, conflate the natural and the artificial. They have grown up in the city, and the human-altered is their habitat, after all. When Marcovaldo explains how to tell if the moon is waxing or waning, they ask "allora il cognac è calante? La *ci* ha la gobba a levante! (Is cognac waning, Papa? The *C*'s hump is to the east!)" and "E la luna che ditta l'ha messa? (What company put the moon up, then?)" (80; 73). For children who know only the city, there is little difference between the natural moon and the artificial C of the GNAC.

When Michelino, as inclined to action as his father, fires a fistful of gravel at the GNAC from his slingshot, the conflation of natural and artificial is shattered along with the neon sign. Marcovaldo cocks his hand to slap Michelino, but freezes. The description that follows bears quoting at length:

Marcovaldo ... si sentì come proiettato nello spazio. Il buio che ora regnava all'altezza dei tetti faceva come una barriera oscura che escludeva laggiù il mondo dove continuavano a vorticare geroglifici gialli e verdi e rossi ... Da questo mondo non saliva lassù che una diffusa fosforescenza, vaga come un fumo. E ad alzare lo sguardo non più abbarbagliato, s'apriva la prospettiva degli spazi, le costellazioni si dilatavano in profondità, il firmamento ruotava per ogni dove, sfera che contiene tutto e non la contiene nessun limite e solo uno sfettire della sua trama, come una breccia, apriva verso Venere, per farla risaltare sola sopra la cornice della terra, con la sua ferma trafittura di luce esplosa e concentrata in un punto.

Sospesa in questo cielo, la luna nuova anziché ostentare l'astratta apparenza di mezzaluna rivelava la sua natura di sfera opaca illuminata intorno dagli sbiechi raggi d'un sole perduto dalla terra ... E Marcovaldo a guardare quella stretta riva di luna tagliata là tra ombra e luce, provava una nostalgia come di raggiungere una spiaggia rimasta miracolosamente soleggiata nella notte. (Marcovaldo ... felt as if he had been flung into space. The darkness that now reigned at roof-level made a kind of obscure barrier that shut out the world below, where yellow and green and red hieroglyphics continued to whirl...From this world only a diffuse phosphorescence rose up this high, vague as smoke. And raising your eyes, no longer blinded, you saw the perspective of space unfold, the constellations expanded in depth, the firmament turning in every direction, a sphere that contains everything and is contained by no boundary, and only a

thinning of its weft, like a breach, opened towards Venus, to make it stand out alone over the frame of the earth, with its steady slash of light exploded and concentrated at one point.

Suspended in the sky, the new moon—rather than display the abstract appearance of a half-moon—revealed its true nature as an opaque sphere, its whole outline illuminated by the oblique rays of a sun the earth had lost...And Marcovaldo, looking at that narrow shore of moon cut there between shadow and light, felt a nostalgia, as if yearning to arrive at a beach which had stayed miraculously sunny in the night.) (81-2; 74-5)

With Michelino's shot, the world changes. In a role-reversal, the natural darkness now suppresses the artificial light of the city, and Marcovaldo and his children are afforded a vision not only of the celestial bodies, but of the divine—the “firmament turning in every direction,” the infinite “sphere that contains everything and is contained by no boundary.” To continue the connection between awe of nature and the possibility of love, Calvino sets the scene under the rule of Venus, the “morning star” representative of love and wishes. Isolina is “carried away as if in ecstasy;” Fiordaligi at last discerns the young girl's “lunar smile” (75). The girl's face becomes visible at the moment the actual moon and Venus manifest themselves in the now unaltered night sky. The two would-be lovers blow each other kisses. This moment, brief though it proves, is one of victory for Marcovaldo. The music swells as Calvino depicts a parodic, sentimental scene in which contact with Nature enables love to flourish.

Of course, such a triumph over the city cannot last for Marcovaldo. The economic operation of the city ensures that any victory over urban forces is doomed to fail. Spaak's rival company suborns Marcovaldo and his family to keep doing what they already are doing: shooting out Spaak's sign every time workmen repair it. The family's strikes on behalf of nature and love also, however, work against them. “[L]a scritta spenta fece crescere l'allarme tra i creditori; la “Spaak” fallì. ([T]he turned-off sign increased the alarm among the creditors; and Spaak went out of business,))” (83; 76). For a brief period, “Nel cielo di Marcovaldo la luna piena

tondeggiava in tutto il suo splendore. (In the sky of Marcovaldo the full moon shone, round, in all its splendor).” (83; 76). However the company’s rival, Tomahawk Cognac, soon replaces the sign with one of its own—one that illuminates every two seconds “a caratteri di fuoco, caratteri alti e spessi il doppio di prima (in letters of fire, letters twice as high and broad as before)” —that blares “TOMAHAWK COGNAC” (83; 76). The new sign blocks out the night again, even worse than before: “non c’erano più luna né firmamento né cielo (there was no more moon or firmament or sky)” (83-4; 76). With the disappearance of the natural sky comes the destruction of the possibility of love. “l’abbaino della ragazza lunare era sparito dietro a un’enorme, impenetrabile *vu doppia*. (The garret of the lunar girl had vanished behind an enormous, impenetrable *W*.)” (84; 76). The economic reality of the city, which in the terrain of control has the power to block out the sky, makes provisional any attempt to establish contact not only with nature, but with other people. At every turn the city subverts the pastoral experience of the stars and the romantic experience of young love, redolent as it is of medieval courtly love, with maidens adored chastely from afar by the light of the moon. The city does not allow the night of stories and tale—the night which permits gazers to wonder at the stars and lovers to stare into each other’s eyes by moonlight. Calvino tempts his characters with visions of natural beauty, only to allow the gritty verisimilitude of his counter-pastoral city to shatter them.

Although it is extensive, the city’s control over nature is not total, however. Elements of nature encroach from time to time, and Marcovaldo is keenly aware of them, as Calvino indicates in his first story, “Funghi in città (Mushrooms in the city).” In this story, rather than Marcovaldo setting out in search of nature, he stumbles upon it in the city in the form of a patch of mushrooms. However, when he stumbles on these encounters with Nature bursting through the cracks in the urban concrete, Marcovaldo has no idea how to interpret them. He does not

know how to read nature. This is not to say that he does not notice it—quite the contrary. Marcovaldo is never captivated by artificial elements designed specifically to attract his attention: the billboards, neon signs and traffic lights of the city he inhabits.

Invece, una foglia che ingiallisse su un ramo, un piuma che si impigliasse ad una tegola, non gli sfuggivano mai: non c'era tafano sul dorso d'un cavallo, pertugio di tarlo in una tavola, buccia di fico spiacciata sul marciapiede che Marcovaldo non notasse, e non facesse oggetto di ragionamento, scoprendo i mutamenti della stagione, i desideri del suo animo, e le miserie della sua esistenza. (Instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of the season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence.) (3; 1)

Though a city-dweller, Marcovaldo has a heightened awareness of the nature. This is not because Marcovaldo has some primordial connection to the natural world as a displaced man of the earth. Rather, the natural stands out to Marcovaldo *because the city is his environment*. The “vetrine, insegne luminose, manifesti (shop-windows, neon signs, posters)” (3; 1) do not stand out because they form part of the everyday landscape for Marcovaldo. His heightened awareness of nature stems from his residence in the city, where incursions of the natural are rare. An advertisement pasted to a wall is nothing to notice. He has seen thousands of them—as has every city resident. However, a patch of mushrooms growing on the subway platform is something new, something out of place, something to notice.

When Marcovaldo spots the patch (“funghi, veri funghi, che stavano spuntando proprio nel cuore della città! [mushrooms, real mushrooms, sprouting right in the heart of the city!]” [4, 2]), he enters a sort of Arcadian reverie: “A Marcovaldo parve che il mondo grigio e misero che lo circondava diventasse tutt’a un tratto generoso di ricchezze nascoste, e che dalla vita ci si potesse ancora aspettare qualcosa. (To Marcovaldo the gray and wretched world surrounding him seemed suddenly generous with hidden riches; something could still be expected of life)” (4;

2). He regales his family with tales of how delightful it will be to gather the mushrooms, how delicious they are when cooked properly. He keeps a close eye on the mushrooms' progress, and on the street sweeper Amadigi, whom Marcovaldo dislikes, because his job is "in cerca di ogni traccia naturale da cancellare a colpi di scopa (seeking any trace of nature, to be eradicated by his broom)" (5; 3). When the rain comes, the next day Marcovaldo and his family, Amadigi and his family, and, ultimately, several trainloads of commuters all take to gathering the mushrooms. Of course, the mushrooms are poisonous and they all wind up in the hospital, subject to the operation of the stomach-pump. None of them even manages to eat very many mushrooms, Calvino's narrator observes: "non grave, perché la quantità di funghi mangiati da ciascuno era assai poca. (It was not serious, because the number of mushrooms eaten by each person was quite small)" (6; 4). Olken is puzzled by Marcovaldo's haplessness in the face of nature in the city: "His rural wisdom should be operative, even if only minimally, when he encounters that rare sign of the living and growing thing in the unlikely environment of the city" (120). However, Marcovaldo, while certainly sensitive to the presence of natural elements, is no repository of rural wisdom. Rather, he is a victim of the urban myth, the city-generated illusion of the pastoral embrace of nature—a nature that will nurture humans without labor on their part. Marcovaldo was seeking mushrooms for nothing. Once again, Calvino undercuts the pastoral dream by showing how it fails contact with practice. Marcovaldo does not know how to identify mushrooms—never even considers that they might be poisonous. Appropriately, his misreading of the natural realm lands him in one of the most artificial and regimented places imaginable: a city hospital.

The city, after all, is Marcovaldo's true natural environment. His children, even more accustomed to city life than he is, conflate the artificial with the things of nature—the moon with

neon signs, cows with the tram. This is not to say that Marcovaldo is comfortable in the city. One of the elements of Calvino's urban counter-pastoral is that none of its residents seems to be entirely comfortable there.<sup>196</sup> Rather, though not necessarily at ease, Marcovaldo has learned to inhabit the city, as organisms learn to inhabit their natural environments. In "Il bosco sull'autostrada (The forest on the superhighway)," Marcovaldo's family, in grave danger of freezing to death in the middle of winter, sets out to gather wood. It is an activity that has been repeated, doubtless, since humans learned to use fire—an act that harkens to prehistory, when humans roamed the terrain (there was no "wilderness" at that time—it was all wilderness) in search of the necessities of life. In the city, of course, the activity is absurd. "Looking for wood in the city!" says Calvino's narrator. "Easier said than done!" ("Andare per legna in città: una parola!") (40; 36). Marcovaldo finds next to nothing. However, Michelino has been reading a book in which woodsmen go off to the forest to chop wood. That, he decides, is the solution. The children will go to the forest to chop wood. Michelino is misguided by a fairy tale as artificial as the pastoral; he turns from his book of fables, and, like his father, tries to fit it to the world he inhabits—an urban world that has nothing to do with the fictional one in his book.

Nevertheless, after some walking, the children find an actual forest along the highway:

[U]na folta vegetazione di strani alberi copriva la vista della pianura. Avevano i tronchi fini fini, diritti o obliqui; e chiome piatte e estese, dalle più strane forme e dai più strane colori, quando un'auto passando le illuminava coi fanali. Rami a forma di dentrificio, di faccia, di formaggio, di mano, di rasoio, di bottiglia, di mucca, di pneumatico, costellate da fogliame di lettere dell'alfabeto. ([A] thick growth of strange trees blocked the view of the plain. Their trunks were very very slender, erect or slanting; and their crowns were flat and outspread, revealing the strangest shapes and the strangest colors when a passing car illuminated them with its headlights. Boughs in the form of a toothpaste tube, a face, cheese, hand, razor, bottle, cow, tire, all dotted with a foliage of letters of the alphabet.) (41; 37)

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<sup>196</sup> This is a counter of the classical pastoral, in which people effortlessly take their ease in a natural environment.



The description is not a poetic one. It is not that the boughs of the trees *resemble* these shapes. They *represent* these shapes. They are billboards. The children have never seen a forest before; to them, the billboards seem to fit the description they may have encountered in stories. In a bit of ironic play, Calvino has the moon rise over the scene, as it does in other stories when Marcovaldo and his family have a moment of contact with unmodified nature: “E i fratelli guardavano incantati la luna spuntare tra quelle strane ombre: — Com’è bello ... (spellbound, the brothers watched the moon rise among those strange shadows: ‘How beautiful it is ...’)” (41; 37). Marcovaldo returns to the “forest” with his sons to finish the job of cutting firewood, and a police officer is sent out to investigate reports of children vandalizing billboards. To escape the policeman’s gaze, Marcovaldo and his sons do what prey does when seeking to escape a predator: they camouflage themselves. They do not, however, camouflage themselves in “Nature;” they camouflage themselves among the artifacts of the city—the billboards themselves. The (somewhat nearsighted) officer sees one son, “a big child licking his lips,” masquerading as cheese advertisement (38). Then his headlights fall on Marcovaldo, atop an advertisement for a headache tablet, sawing through a section as quickly as he can. The lights dazzle him, leaving him motionless, clinging to the sign—an ear attached to an enormous head. The officer does not see Marcovaldo, however. It is the advertisement that attracts his attention. “Ah, sì: compresse Stappa! Un cartellone efficace! Ben trovato! (Oh, yes, Stappa tablet! Very effective ad! Smart idea!)” observes the officer. “Quell’omino lassù con quella sega significa l’emicrania che taglia in due la testa! L’ho subito capito! (That little man up there with the saw represents the migraine that is cutting the head in two. I got it right away!)” (43; 39). He drives off, blinded by his familiarity with the text of advertising to the presence of actual people, sawing down actual billboards. In accepting the terrain of the urban environment, Marcovaldo is

able to make use of it—as the resident of a forest might make use of that. In recognizing that the city is his nature, and applying his knowledge of it, Marcovaldo enjoys one of his rare victories: he secures firewood for his family. In this case, text leads him and his family to the resource that may have saved their lives, and text also allows them to camouflage themselves from an urban predator in the form of the police.

Many critics, as noted earlier, take a very dark view of Calvino's depiction of Marcovaldo and his life. The vision is one of Stoic endurance at best, with despair and frustration more likely. Markey, for example, suggests that Marcovaldo has two options in the face of his continual failures before the omnipresent city. He can "hurl himself into life's fray" or he can decide "simply to endure" (55). Marcovaldo's realm of possible action, she writes, is severely limited: "he is at bottom not one of life's doers but a typical Calvino spectator, a solitary observer who tentatively tests his simple dreams only to see them come to naught in the indifference of the city's cement jungle" (52). Markey sees Marcovaldo through the lens of Chaplin's "Little Tramp" character—though in this case a darker version of it, subject to perpetual frustration. However, a character from literature rather than film might also prove helpful in understanding how the character of Marcovaldo interacts with nature in these fables. After all, part of Marcovaldo's problem is that he refuses simply to observe; he acts on his dreams—with enthusiasm. If Marcovaldo has an analogue it is not with some Flaubertian *flâneur*, but with the comic aspects of Knight of the Doleful Countenance, Don Quixote. Addled by pastoral tales about the nurturing elements of pure nature, Marcovaldo tries to behave as if the tales applied not just in the stories, but also in the everyday life of the city. There is comedy and pathos in witnessing Marcovaldo's failures—as there is in witnessing Quixote's attempt to apply the values derived from romances of chivalry to sixteenth-century Castile. Both the Don and

Marcovaldo undercut fictions: the fiction of the pastoral and the fiction of the chivalric romance. However, part of their charm derives from the dual nature of their critique. Quixote is the agent of parody, of satirizing the romances—even as the character affirms the value of the otherworldly virtues he finds in the books. In much the same way, in his role as the agent undercutting the illusion of pastoral Arcadia, Marcovaldo still affirms the value of the illusion. There is no nature for Marcovaldo to escape to, but through comic guerrilla actions he does manage to snatch moments of pleasure and even magic from his pursuit of natural beauty in the city. The result is comedy—a wry, provisional, compromised comedy—but comic nonetheless.

The following section leaves aside fiction to consider a journalistic account of an actual person who was far more successful in pursuing his dream of escaping the city, of leaving the text for refuge in a realm of pure experience of nature. The results in this case are not at all comic.

### ***Into the Wild: Longing for the Sublime***

In relating the story of Christopher Johnson McCandless's last two years, Jon Krakauer includes what seems to be a digression: an account of his own near-fatal attempt to scale Devils Thumb, a peak on the Stikine ice cap in Alaska. Of course, Krakauer's mountain tale is no digression; it is central to the chief tension of his narrative, which is not between Man and Nature, but between nature and text. This tension is complex: both men seek to leave the world of text, to encounter an unmediated realm of experience between themselves as subjects and the physical world. In both cases, reading is to blame for their desires. McCandless, Krakauer writes in his "Author's Note," "was captivated by the writings of Leo Tolstoy"—in particular their moral rigor and anti-materialism. He also admired Thoreau and Pasternak, among others. Krakauer explains that his own foolhardiness "was inflamed by the scattershot passions of youth

and a literary diet overly rich in the works of Nietzsche, Kerouac, and John Menlove Edwards” (135).<sup>197</sup> Neither McCandless nor Krakauer sought the pleasant embrace of the pastoral garden—a nature that would comfort them with beauty and ease. Instead, they sought what this study has called the “dyspastoral”—a contact with wild nature that daunts them, defies them, pushes back against their efforts, and, ultimately, might kill them. As Krakauer explains: “When the boy headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found. In abundance” (Author’s Note). Though this realm of wild nature seems somehow “more real” than the arch-literary, artificial realm of the pastoral, it is in its way just as much a product of text. This is not to imply that wild nature does not exist. On the contrary, both men encounter it at separate moments, and it kills one of them. As with the pastoral, the dream of the encounter with wild nature never survives contact with the world of lived experience. Either the textual dream dies, or the subject holding to that dream does. In the case of Krakauer’s own Alaskan expedition, too much faith in the text nearly kills him. For McCandless, who sought nothing more fervently than a shedding of culture in favor of nature, too much devotion to a textual sublime he mistakes for reality sets him on the road to his death.

*Into the Wild* stems from a January 1993 article of the same title that Krakauer wrote for *Outside* magazine. McCandless had been found and his body recovered in September 1992 by a group of hunters, and Krakauer had been assigned to cover the story—to figure out why an Emory University honor graduate from the Washington D.C. suburbs had starved to death in an abandoned school bus just north of Denali National Park. Krakauer explains McCandless’s

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<sup>197</sup> Krakauer describes Edwards as “a deeply troubled writer and psychiatrist who, before putting an end to his life with a cyanide capsule in 1958, had been one of the preeminent British rock climbers of the day” (135).

actions in two ways. The first relies on the observation that McCandless's behavior is not especially unusual in a general sense: it is not uncommon for young men to take risks that older people deem foolish. The second, however, depends on the way in which McCandless was different from many people who test themselves in the wilderness:

Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large, but rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul.<sup>198</sup> He soon discovered, however, what Muir and Thoreau already knew: An extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one's attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to live off the land without both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds. (183)

Many of the correspondents who wrote to *Outside* after the article ran deride McCandless as a clueless city boy from the lower 48, trying to live out Jack London/Walter Mitty fantasies in a terrain utterly unforgiving to the unprepared. "His ignorance, which could have been cured by a USGS quadrant and a Boy Scout manual, is what killed him," writes one critic. "Such willful ignorance...amounts to disrespect for the land" (71). However, Krakauer defends McCandless, noting that no incompetent could have survived 113 days in the manner he did without a high level of skill and resourcefulness. "[H]e wasn't a nutcase, he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast. McCandless was something else—although precisely *what* is hard to say. A pilgrim, perhaps" (85).<sup>199</sup> The term is an accurate one. McCandless was a sort of pilgrim, in search of a terrain that would offer him the experience of direct contact with nature, without the mediation

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<sup>198</sup>[Footnote mine]. Of course, this is also precisely the reason Thoreau took to the woods outside of Concord. See chapters two and three of this study for a discussion of Thoreau's journey in the inner and outer realms.

<sup>199</sup> In a report about visiting the site shortly after McCandless's body was discovered, Krakauer quotes his friend Roman Dial, a biology professor and extremely accomplished mountaineer and outdoorsman: "Living completely off the land like that, month after month, is incredibly difficult. I've never done it. And I'd bet you that very few, if any, of the people who call McCandless incompetent have ever done it either" (185).

of text. Of course, it was literature that helped convince him that such primal contact was possible and worthy of relentless pursuit.

The last book that McCandless finished reading, shortly before his death, was Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. Those who have studied McCandless's exploits and death know this because McCandless kept a meticulous journal, not only of his interaction with his Alaskan environment, but with the books he brought along with him for his 113 days "in the wild." Two weeks after he finished reading the novel, he was dead. He was, as Krakauer indicates on several occasions, an assiduous, voracious reader, who highlighted passages he found important, and scribbled notes in the margins of his texts. Some of the last sections he had highlighted, Krakauer reports, were these:

*For a moment [Lara] rediscovered the purpose of her life. She was here on earth to grasp the meaning of its wild enchantment and to call each thing by its right name, or, if this were not within her power, to give birth out of love for life to successors who would do it in her place*

"NATURE/PURITY" he printed in bold characters at the top of the page.

*Oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless dullness of human eloquence, from all those sublime phrases, to take refuge in nature, apparently so inarticulate, or in the wordlessness of long, grinding, labor, of sound sleep, of true music, or of a human understanding rendered speechless by emotion!*

McCandless starred and bracketed the paragraph and circled 'refuge in nature' in black ink. (189)

It is impossible to know exactly McCandless's line of thought as he annotated these passages. However, they indicate a concern with the interaction of text and nature. The purpose, Lara says in the passage, is to understand the earth in its wildness, and "to call each thing by its right name." In order to do such a thing, other text—the "meaningless dullness of human eloquence"—must be suppressed in favor of speechlessness. Only then can nature be read and named properly.

*Zhivago* was only the last of McCandless's reading however; and for one who so desperately wanted to escape the confines of culture, he brought an awful lot of it with him—physically:

The heaviest item in McCandless's half-full backpack was his library: nine or ten paperbound books, most of which had been given to him by Jan Burres in Niland. Among these volumes were titles by Thoreau and Tolstoy and Gogol, but McCandless was no literary snob. He simply carried what he thought he might enjoy reading, including mass-market books by Michael Crichton, Robert Pirsig, and Louis L'Amour. (162)

This man in search of an unmediated contact with nature, a man who burned his money, refused a compass or a USGS topographical map, and abandoned even his watch, still found it important to lug along a heavy paperback library that included Louis L'Amour and Michael Crichton. For McCandless the opportunity for entertainment as well as truth was available not only in nature but also in text. McCandless had an ongoing concern with the question of truth and authenticity. In his copy of *Walden*, Krakauer notes, McCandless highlighted the famous passage: "rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices" (117). McCandless had penciled "TRUTH" in the upper margin of the copy found with his remains. It is a strange irony that McCandless's chosen "wilderness" bore more of a resemblance to Thoreau's Walden than to any fictional account of living in the wild. As Krakauer explains: "[T]he wilderness surrounding the bus—the patch of overgrown country where McCandless was determined 'to become lost in the wild'—scarcely qualified as wilderness by Alaska standards" (165). A national park is sixteen miles away, a major thoroughfare less than thirty; and there are four cabins in a six-mile radius. However, McCandless was not unaware that his entry into the wilderness was very much a function of mind as well as of terrain. McCandless yearned for "a blank spot on the map,"

Krakauer writes. “In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: he simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*” (174). McCandless brought some texts with him—those that reinforced his literary notion of an encounter with the wilderness. Any cultural artifact that might interfere with this connection had to be abandoned.

However, McCandless did not believe in abandoning the use of text to influence others. In addition to his journal, he wrote reams of letters and postcards, maintaining contact with the friends he made on his journey (though not with his family in Virginia). He offers both suggestions both for reading, and for living. In one letter, he exhorts his friend Wayne Westerberg, a wheat farmer in South Dakota, to start reading Tolstoy: “*Wayne, you really should read War and Peace... That is a very powerful and highly symbolic book. It has things in it that I think you will understand. Things that escape most people*” (33). In another, he writes to Ronald Franz, an 80-year-old man who felt such affection for Chris that he asked to adopt him, of the need to “make a radical change” in his lifestyle: “*The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences... You are wrong if you think joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us*” (57). In the advice he dispenses, McCandless illustrates the degree to which he remains in thrall to the idea that signs of the divine can be discerned through contact with the world—even as he dispenses his advice through text. In several different sites, McCandless leaves textual clues as to his passing—letters to unknown wanderers that will follow him. Especially illustrative is the one McCandless inscribed on a plywood plank patching a window of the bus where he died:



TWO YEARS HE WALKS THE EARTH. NO PHONE, NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTHETIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS THE ROAD...NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION, HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD. (163)

Like his journal entries, many of McCandless's road signs refer to him in the third person—a detached view of himself as “aesthetic voyager” seeking a realm of pure experience apart from the poison of civilization. However, this self-conscious self-description is indebted to Roger Miller's “King of the Road”—a romanticization of the sort of nomadic life McCandless had advocated to others. By the end of his life, McCandless continues to use text to prod his audience into action, but he sheds his road moniker for his real name, the third person for the first person. His writing takes a grisly turn on his last posted sign: a plea for assistance written on a page he had torn from a Gogol novel: “*IN THE NAME OF GOD PLEASE REMAIN TO SAVE ME*” (12).

The posited audience was important to McCandless, whether in letters, signs, and perhaps most important: in his journal. The moniker “Alexander Supertramp,” which McCandless adopted on taking to the road, allowed him to write his journal in the third person—to at record his experiences while maintaining a sort of ironic distance from them. However, despite its occasional emotional grandiosity, McCandless does not alter incidents, Krakauer explains: “Although the tone of the journal—written in the third person in a stilted, self-conscious voice—often veers toward melodrama, the available evidence indicates that McCandless did not misrepresent the facts; telling the truth was a credo he took seriously” (29). The account McCandless wrote of his first encounter with frustrations and near-fatality in the wilderness indicates that he was not utterly oblivious to the dangers he was facing. On the contrary, he specifically sought out that danger. Starting in October, 1990, McCandless bought a second hand aluminum canoe and decided to paddle down a 400-mile stretch of the Colorado River, from

Topock, Arizona, through Havasu, and to the Gulf of California.<sup>200</sup> Of course, the Colorado River does not reach the Gulf of California anymore. Extensive canals and diversion dams rob it of any flow long before it reaches the sea. What McCandless finds below the Morelos Dam at the Mexican border is a tangle of canals, dead ends, and marsh. The language is dramatic, but not necessarily flattering. McCandless is not portraying himself as a hero, as shown in his entries from December 9 and 10, 1990:

All hopes collapse! The canal does not reach the ocean but merely peters out into a vast swamp. Alex is utterly confounded...Alex becomes progressively lost to point where he must push canoe through reeds and drag it through mud. All is in despair. ... 12/10 ... Completely demoralized and frustrated he lays in his canoe at day's end and weeps. (35)

The terrain he encounters does not match the map he had in his mind. McCandless, though there is no indication he was aware of it, had fallen prey to the same delusory dream that so entranced men like William Gilpin and the other would-be developers of Eden in the West—that is: if one wishes for a river outlet to the sea, then it must exist, whether there is enough water or not. English speaking duck hunting guides happen upon him and give him and his boat a ride to the nearest coastal village (“It is a miracle,” writes McCandless [35]).

However, this is not the last miracle McCandless would need. On more than one occasion, McCandless’s desire to experience the world new, in an adamic state, led him to forego even the most basic preparations—river maps, for example, or tide tables. Refusal to consult the latter nearly killed McCandless 18 months before his Alaska expedition. On Jan. 11. 1991, he took his canoe out into the Gulf of California, beached it on a sandbar well away from shore, and waited to watch the tide come up. After about an hour, enormous winds began to blow from the shore. In conjunction with tidal current the wind would carry him out to the open ocean—if the

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<sup>200</sup> The stretch of river through the Grand Canyon, first explored in 1869 by John Wesley Powell, and known for its challenging whitewater, is 250 miles north of where McCandless put on the river. See chapter three for more on that stretch of river.

wind-whipped whitecaps did not flip his boat and drown him first. McCandless's journal conveys his sense of terror and desperation:

[H]e screams and beats canoe with oar.<sup>201</sup> The oar breaks. Alex has one spare oar. ... Finally through extreme effort and much cursing he manages to beach canoe on jetty and collapses exhausted on sand at sundown. This incident led Alex to abandon canoe and return north. (36)

McCandless's first encounter with the one of the traditional terrains of wild sublime—the ocean—ends in McCandless's departure and concession of defeat. In this case, he was lucky: able to save himself and live to write about it.<sup>202</sup> Of course he would not survive the next such encounter. The question of McCandless's wilderness savvy is an important one, as it centers on one's ability to "read" nature. The term is a common one for many outdoor pursuits: river boaters "read" rivers; sailors and sea kayakers "read" ocean conditions; climbers "read" the rock or the ice. An inability to read the signs certain aspects of nature present not only marks a practitioner as a "greenhorn" (as Krakauer quotes some critics referring to McCandless), but it also occasionally leads to injury or death. Without some common aids (map and compass, tide tables, extra provisions, appropriate gear), one had better be able to read nature very well, because the margin for error narrows considerably.

Krakauer notes that two incidents in particular gave critics a basis to claim that as a lousy reader of nature, McCandless had no business trying to survive on his own in the backcountry—much less without much basic backcountry gear. The first concerns a moose; the second, wild potato seeds. In the first incident, on June 9, McCandless manages to bring down what he calls in his journal a "MOOSE!" with his .22 Remington. This in itself is an amazing feat. A .22 is

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<sup>201</sup> In a canoe, what McCandless is using is a paddle. An oar is a different instrument entirely.

<sup>202</sup> Though in some ways the encounter is similar to Thoreau's on Katahdin, unlike Thoreau McCandless shows little inclination to reflect on the meaning of the encounter for his ability to thrive in inhospitable environments. See chapter two for more on Thoreau's encounter with wilderness.

generally considered much too small-bore to kill big game, Krakauer reports. Following the advice of South Dakota hunters, he tries to smoke the meat, instead of slicing it into thin strips and drying it, as Alaskans generally do. Maggots take the meat, an enormous waste: “[L]ooks like disaster. I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of the greatest tragedies of my life,” McCandless writes (167). Later, two of the moose hunters that found the body declared that McCandless had misidentified the animal. It was a caribou: “[I]t was obvious that animal was a caribou,” one of them told Krakauer for the *Outside* article. “The kid didn’t know what he was doing up there” (177). In the second case, some investigators determined that McCandless had starved to death because he had mistaken wild sweet pea, which is generally considered poisonous, for sweet potato seed, which is not. The reasoning was that the wild sweet pea so would have weakened McCandless that he would not have been able to feed himself, much less walk out in search of help. In his article for *Outside*, Krakauer reports these presumed failures in reading on McCandless’s part. However, both of them, as it turned out, were wrong. Later testing showed that McCandless had indeed, beyond a shadow of doubt, killed a moose. “The boy made some mistakes on the Stampede Trail, but confusing a caribou with a moose wasn’t among them,” Krakauer writes in his later book (178). Along the same lines, Krakauer wondered how McCandless had managed to eat huge amounts of wild potato seeds until August, when he suddenly managed to poison himself. Years later he decided that not wild sweet pea, but a fungus growing on the potato seeds had weakened, and eventually killed, McCandless. “McCandless simply had the misfortune to eat moldy seeds,” observes Krakauer. “An innocent mistake, it was nevertheless sufficient to end his life” (194).<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> After reading an article in a medical journal and consulting experts, Krakauer believes that the fungus *Rhizoctonia leguminicola*, which likes legumes and clammy weather, grew on the seeds McCandless had stored in his wet, grimy, Ziplock bags. *R. leguminicola* produces the alkaloid

In the preceding cases critics falsely accused McCandless of having misread his environment. However, perhaps his greatest failure was not in misreading the texts he had on hand—the signs nature offered him—but in refusing to read the culture-bound texts that might have enabled him to save himself. His biggest mistake may have been in believing that he needed to leave a good map behind in order to have the kind of experience he sought. The map he had relied on to find his spot, not far north of Denali National Park, had been “scrounged from a gas station” (5). The Stampede Trail, which led McCandless to his camp, appears as a dotted line stopping in the terrain just between the Susana and the Teklanika rivers. On his journey into the area in April, McCandless waded across the first, walked as far as the second, then decided to turn around and establish a base camp. In this case, McCandless truly misreads his environment—a misreading a good map might have helped him to correct. His errors would cost him. As Krakauer writes:

To McCandless’s inexperienced eye, there was nothing to suggest that two months hence, as the glaciers and snowfields at the Teklanika’s headwater thawed in the summer heat, its discharge would multiply nine or ten times in volume, transforming the river into a deep, violent torrent that bore no resemblance to the gentle brook he’d blithely waded across in April. (163)

When McCandless attempts to walk out July 3, he finds the Teklanika impassible: a nearly freezing, raging flood, carrying a tremendous load of glacial sediment from the Alaska Range, and roaring “like a freight train” above a set of continuous rapids that went on for miles. Instead of venturing across, McCandless turns back to his camp. “Disaster. ... Rained in. River looks impossible. Lonely. Scared,” McCandless writes in his journal (170). Based on the information

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swainsonine, which prevents the body from metabolizing food. In addition to the massive pharmacological effects alkaloids can have on those who ingest them, if the ingester already is malnourished, the lack of glucose or fat to spare in the system prevents it from shedding the toxin. The person slowly starves to death, no matter how much he eats. And McCandless’s diet was meager (194-5).

he had at that time, McCandless made the best choice. However, he should, if he had taken a USGS map, have had more information to work with. If he had scouted about a mile upriver, he would have found that the river braided, with channels possibly fordable at some locations. Also, he might have noticed that there was a USGS river gauging station half a mile downstream. However, as a result of McCandless's search for *terra* that could remain *incognita* in his mind, he also passed up two opportunities to save himself. Krakauer, when he visits the site of McCandless's death, crosses the flooded Teklanika in a basket on a zipline at the ranger station. However, in McCandless's case, "because he lacked a good map, the cable spanning the river also remained incognito" (174). Krakauer knows the station and the line are there, because he relies on a 1:63360 topographical map. And he has brought with him friends experienced in navigating backcountry. And hardware to execute a Tyrolean traverse to retrieve the basket from what would have been McCandless's side of the river.

Krakauer's decisions in this case are as important to the narrative as McCandless's, because many of the factors leading to McCandless's death: youthful bravado and an enthralled belief in certain fictions, nearly led to Krakauer's death a few decades earlier. While the narrative centers on McCandless's death, the pivotal chapters concern a solo expedition that Krakauer took in his twenties to the Stikine ice cap in Alaska—an expedition that nearly killed him. For Krakauer in 1977, he writes, "Climbing mattered. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything...to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real" (134). Krakauer reports that he decided to attempt the treacherous north face of Devils Thumb, which rises some 6,000 feet from its base on the glacier. He planned to ski the glacier, evading the many crevasses, and then scale the face solo. He begins with photos of the Thumb, which "held an almost pornographic fascination for me. How

would it feel, I wondered, to be balanced on that bladelike summit ridge ... Could a person keep a lid on his terror long enough to reach the top and get back down?" (135). The attempt nearly kills him twice. The first is on the ski approach, before he even reaches the rock face, when a contraption he had rigged out of shower rods barely keeps him from plummeting into a crevasse: "[A]fter I extricated myself, I bent double with dry heaves, thinking about what it would be like to be lying in a pile at the bottom of the crevasse, waiting for death to come, with nobody aware of how or where I'd met my end" (139). The second is on his first climbing attempt, when he gets "rocked in." That is, he runs out of structurally sound ice in which to plant his axes for holds:

I tried left, then right, but kept striking rock. The frost feathers holding me up, it became apparent, were maybe five inches thick and had the structural integrity of stale corn bread. Below was thirty-seven hundred feet of air... The sour taste of panic rose in my throat. My eyesight blurred, I began to hyperventilate, my calves started to shake. I shuffled a few feet farther to the right, hoping to find thicker ice, but managed only to bend an ice ax on the rock. (143)

Krakauer is lucky enough to find sufficient ice to support him on his descent. On his second attempt, scaling a less daunting route, Krakauer has to descend in the middle of a snowstorm that, again, could have sent him to the bottom of a crevasse as he searched vainly for his tent. In a bit of irony, on his third attempt, Krakauer ascends fast and light—no gear other than his axes—and makes the peak: "Fittingly, the summit was a surreal, malevolent place, an improbably slender wedge of rock and rime no wider than a file cabinet. It did not encourage loitering" (153). Krakauer writes that he had never doubted that climbing the Thumb would change his life. It did not, however.

The fact that I survived my Alaska adventure and McCandless did not survive his was largely a matter of chance; had I not returned from the Stikine Ice cap in 1977, people would have been quick to say of me—as they now say of him—that I had a death wish. Eighteen years after the event, I now recognize that I suffered from hubris, perhaps, and an appalling innocence, certainly; but I wasn't suicidal. (155)

Krakauer returns to the same construction job he had held in Colorado. Inspired by his reading, by mountain myth, Krakauer had set out in search of an experience that would alter his life. Instead, he ends up exactly back where he started—and he considers himself lucky.

Neither McCandless nor Krakauer's attempts to find a direct contact with the natural world survive actual contact with that world. In McCandless's case, he finds a wilderness every bit as dangerous as he had imagined—and more lethal. Krakauer, though his ascent did not change his life as he had imagined, does not fail entirely. The clue to the nature of his success lies in his description of the first, nearly catastrophically failed ascent he attempts on the Thumb:

Early on a difficult climb, especially a difficult solo climb, you constantly feel the abyss pulling at your back. To resist takes a tremendous conscious effort; you don't dare let your guard down for an instant. The siren song of the void puts you on edge; it makes your movements tentative, clumsy, herky-jerky. But as the climb goes on, you grow accustomed to the exposure, you get used to rubbing shoulders with doom, you come to believe in the reliability of your hands and feet and head. You learn to trust your self-control.

By and by your attention becomes so intensely focused that you no longer notice the raw knuckles, the cramping thighs, the nonstop concentration. A trancelike state settles over your efforts; the climb becomes a clear-eyed dream. ... The accumulated clutter of day-to-day existence ... is temporarily forgotten, crowded from your thoughts by an overpowering clarity of purpose ...

At such moments something resembling happiness actually stirs in your chest, but it isn't the sort of emotion you want to lean on very hard ... (142-3)

Krakauer's language is that of mountain awe—a sort of experience of the sublime in physical activity. Confronted with the abyss, against which one is tiny and insignificant, the climber sets the will—"clarity of purpose." The "clear-eyed dream," and the "something like happiness" that Krakauer describes is at least akin to the kind of experience McCandless was pursuing—a sense of connection between one's abilities and the surroundings in which one exercises them. These moments can be hazardous, as in the case of Krakauer and McCandless. However, the point is to experience the sublime, the moment of wordlessness, and then return to the text; to visit the wild,



and then return to culture; to be awed on the mountaintop, on the sea, in the wilderness, and to retain the means of rendering this awe into text, whether spoken or written. Krakauer writes partially out of his hope that McCandless achieved something of that sense of awe as well, before his death:

Some people who have been brought back from the far edge of starvation, though, report that near the end the hunger vanishes, the terrible pain dissolves, and the suffering is replaced by a sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity. It would be nice to think McCandless experienced a similar rapture. (198)

The last words McCandless wrote in his journal continue his testimony of a world outside his will—a world of real things that pushed back as he pushed against them: “Beautiful blueberries” (199). On the brink of death, weighing about 67 pounds, McCandless writes one final note and takes one last picture of himself holding it up: “I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE LORD. GOODBYE AND MAY GOD BLESS ALL” (199). It is his last act, his returning to the text shortly before he would leave it for good, achieving full, unmediated contact at last with nature. Krakauer, while he does not believe McCandless ever sought death, believes he found a measure of what he sought: “he is smiling in the picture, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God” (199).

### **Word and the Natural World**

Though they differ in tone, style and content, these two works have in common a similar tension. They concern figures befuddled by fictions, in search of a means of escaping a world they deem compromised and unsatisfactory for an immediate encounter with the natural world. Marcovaldo, McCandless, and Krakauer long for different kinds of contact with nature, of course. A garden is too tame for McCandless, though he might appreciate its beauty. And the summit of a mountain, while proving fine scenery from his city’s dingy streets, is nothing Marcovaldo would want to endure hardship to achieve. His life is difficult enough as it is.

William Cronon deftly indicates the connection between the longing for wilderness and the desire for the garden when he writes: “[W]ilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which humans had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin” (79). Marcovaldo desires the garden, but McCandless and Krakauer do too. All three men seek a realm of escape from the world of history.

However, humans cannot live in such close contact with Nature—neither in the garden nor in the wilderness. Marcovaldo achieves a victory here and there, but his triumphs are temporary, and as often as not, the world of history comes roaring back into his life with tragicomic results. McCandless traces the steps of human development in reverse order: from city to farm, to the wilderness of the hunter-gatherer. However, he cannot inhabit a textless world of immediate contact with the nonhuman. As Robert Pogue Harrison observes, “[L]anguage is the ultimate ‘place’ of human habitation” (*Forests* 200). Language is the place where humans return, time and again while they live—unless they are reduced to mere matter: “Without *logos*, there is no place, only habitat; no *domus*, only niche; no finitude, only the endless reproductive cycle of the species-being; no dwelling, only subsisting. In short, *logos* is that which opens the human abode on the earth” (200). In Marcovaldo’s case, the attempt to abandon *logos* always occurs within *logos*. He never really escapes the realm of the city and history. He winds up where he started, no worse for the wear if he has been lucky. Krakauer, too, seeks moments of connection between himself and the mountain he climbs, but the return to culture is inevitable. Of the three figures, only McCandless achieves the goal of leaving the text entirely, but the results surely are not the ones he sought. Like Gilgamesh, one may leave the city to seek the

divine in the wilderness, but the account of the journey must return to civilization, to form the foundations of the city itself.

## Afterword

### Toward an Impure Pastoral

Honor a going thing, goldfinch, corporation, tree,  
morality: any working order,  
animate or inanimate  
A. R. Ammons, “Mechanism”

In *Gilgamesh*, bronze and stone and text form the walls of the city of Ûruk. That is, the city relies on the raw materials, the stone and minerals to form the matter of the wall. It requires the work of humans to shape those materials. And for the cornerstone it requires text, itself carved into stone tablets. If the things of nature and the operation of text form the city, the city is also the site that produces nature and text. Simply by existing, the city sets out the categories of Nature and wilderness. Nature is the realm where *nomos*, the conventions of civilization, must give way to *physis*, the constant interaction and transformation of matter and energy—of things becoming what they are to be. Wilderness becomes the place where the city and its people are not. With the formation of the city, and the production of the text that constitutes it, comes the longing for escape from it, the dream of Arcadia. Nature becomes that entity against which civilization at once defines itself, and for which it longs.

With that longing comes the drive to keep these categories separate—the drive toward purity. The random wildness of nature must be banished from the city, or be so harnessed, so bent to human designs, that it participates in the city’s artifice, becomes the basis for the artificial realm of the city: every tree in a planter, every animal leashed. Conversely, no sign of humanity may intrude on wild nature. A single boot print may transform wilderness into the realm of the human. In his review of Roderick Nash’s study *The Idea of Wilderness*, Thomas Merton writes of the drive that impels the dweller in the suburbs to “conquer” his patch of terrain, the mania for cleansing that seeks to keep the wild and the civilized separated not merely by walls of text, but

frequently by actual, physical quarantine. “Take away the space, the freshness, the rich spontaneity of a wildly flourishing nature, and what will become of the creative pioneer mystique?” he asks (43).

Merton’s view of natural value is centered on the human: the natural is the basis of human creativity, and is valuable to the extent that it is good for humans. Deep Ecologists like Arne Naess, on the other hand, seek to submerge the human into the rest of the world of matter: one claim only among the vast claims other entities make on their environment for their continued existence and flourishing. However, this desire to decenter the human from the world of experience cannot be achieved, only approximated through an act of human imagination. Humans try to imagine what it is the rest of nature may desire. Like the Brethren of Purity, they try to imagine what animals might have to say, were they given voices humans could understand. In this imaginative act the imaginer ends up with an apprehension of the limits of mind, not of the world.

In his work *The Idea of Nature*, R.G. Collingwood suggests Greek natural science conceived of nature as a bearer of *logos*: “saturated or permeated by mind. Greek thinkers regarded the presence of mind in nature as the source of that regularity or orderliness in the natural world whose presence made a science of nature possible” (3). Our capacity for understanding nature rests on a basis of matter. Our understanding of nature also rests on our ability to read the text implicit to it, and which humans have assigned to it.

Without the human, there can be no wilderness, no nature, *and there never was*—even before the arrival of *homo sapiens* through natural selection.

It is true that there is no Nature without culture, but this is not the same as saying that there is no realm of nature at all—a realm that encompasses “different manifestations of this

dynamic material reality” as Manuel DeLanda calls it (21). An encounter with the nonhuman is possible, but as this study has suggested, to the extent humans attempt to represent this encounter they must resort to the operation of mind in text. If the perceiver is lucky, then there is pleasure in this reading out of doors, this realizing either that nature and mind can seem fit for each other—or that there is a material reality, unknowable, that persists even when humans cease to experience it.

In considering these textually and physically contested sites of nature, this study has returned repeatedly to the concept of a realm of nature and a realm of culture that are not continuous with each other, but entangled in each other. It has explored textual terrains that highlight the impossibility of taking refuge in culture from the forces of material nature—and the futility of attempting to escape culture by flight into a nature in many ways constituted by human text. The goal should be not to lament this state of things, but to accept that it never has been any different. At least since the Greeks, *physis* has been shot through with *logos*.

The pastoral is artificial, but that is no reason to abandon the dream of it, or to discount the power of the pastoral dream. Wilderness, too, is defined by human imagination, but it is not so fragile that a boot print can destroy it. Nature and human have always been present in both realms. In text as in world this study turns to the possibility of an impure pastoral—one already shaped by human will, but also independent of it in its way. The impure pastoral, the tainted wilderness, are terrains that humans can inhabit—in both text and world.

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